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INDIA TODAY

HOPE AND GLORY

India's medal prospects at the long-awaited **Tokyo Olympics**

P.V. Sindhu training at the Suchitra Badminton Academy in Hyderabad

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FROM THE
EDITOR-IN-CHIEF

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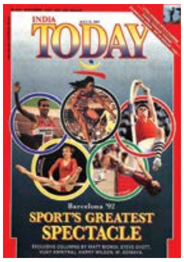
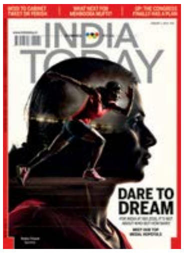
The Olympic Games, which are to be held in Tokyo in two weeks, may be the best antidote to the misery with which the Covid-19 pandemic has blighted people's lives across the globe. As 11,090 athletes converge for the Games, it is a tribute to the human spirit, determined that life must go on regardless. It is a Herculean challenge for the International Olympic Committee to ensure a Covid-free event. If there is any country in the world that can pull it off with a smile, it is Japan. The country is renowned for its self-discipline and meticulous planning. The Games have been the ultimate multidisciplinary sporting contest for over a century and a test of fitness amongst the best from all over the world. The Tokyo Olympics will see athletes from 206 nations competing to determine who is truly, as the Olympic motto goes, 'faster, higher and stronger'. The Games, in their 125-year history, have been cancelled only thrice—during the two world wars—and rescheduled just once—by the pandemic last year. In a way, this will be a very unique Olympic.



July 31, 1992

INDIA TODAY
CHINA'S GREAT LEAP
HOW INDIA CAN DO IT

September 8, 2008



August 1, 2016

Unfortunately for India, every instalment of the Games is also a reminder of our inadequacy as a sporting nation and a time for that soul-searching query—why can't a nation of 1.3 billion people bring in a decent medal haul? It is a rhetorical question. We know the answer—the inability to plan and invest in sporting talent other than cricket. Government bodies are meant to promote sports but become political sinecures and, worse, dens of nepotism and intrigue. The result is there for all to see. India has so far won just 28 medals from 24 Games.

In the 2008 Beijing Games, we ranked 51st, thanks to Abhinav Bindra shooting his way to India's first, and so far solitary, individual Olympic gold. Since then, every instalment of the Olympics has been a descent into ignominy. London 2012 was our best showing yet, with six medals, but we figured at 55th place in the medals tally. In Rio 2016, we won just two medals and stood 67th—along with Mongolia (pop. 3.2 million). This, even as Cuba and Croatia, roughly the size of Telangana and Himachal Pradesh, finished in the top 20, with five golds each.

The government has spent Rs 1,169.65 crore between supporting 18 national sports federations and 128 Olympic hopefuls since 2016 but India's medal tally at the Olympics reminds us every time to lower our expectations. Until we learn to invest in sports at the grassroots level.

However, there is a glimmer of hope this year. India will be sending 120 Indian athletes, our biggest delegation yet, to the Games. We are seeing first-time participants in sports like fencing. It's also the first time that a female sailor, Nethra Kumanan, and a female swimmer, Maana Patel, will compete. Athletes like javelin thrower Neeraj Chopra, who are among the best in the world, bear the heavy burden of expectations of over a billion people who yearn for their sportspersons to succeed. They are our hope for a podium finish.

The Olympic journey of our sportspersons is a triumph of the athletic spirit, their grit and perseverance in already trying times. Besides our poor domestic sports infrastructure and unhelpful officialdom, India's athletes have also had to manage their training through a pandemic that has disrupted everyday life and travel across the globe. Just to qualify for the Olympics, there are distances to clear, timings to meet, and rankings to attain. For that, one needs to compete in events. Unfortunately, most of those were cancelled in 2020 due to the Covid-19 pandemic.

Sportspersons in 'duel sports' such as wrestling and boxing struggled to find sparring partners. Fencer C.A. Bhavani Devi turned her kit bag into a dummy partner to practise on her terrace in Chennai.

Battling Covid 19-induced anxiety has been a recurring issue for athletes. Chopra struggled to focus on training in Patiala as India grappled with a devastating second wave. Others contracted the virus themselves, among them pistol shooters Rahi Sarnobat and Saurabh Chaudhary, women hockey players, including captain Rani Rampal Singh, and a few coaches and staff on the women's boxing team.

The fear now of the Delta variant of Covid-19 means that many Indian athletes, coaches and support staff won't be allowed to come into contact or train with athletes from other countries for three days.

Then, there is the fear of faltering at the final frontier. As P.V. Sindhu, our silver medal-winning shuttler from the Rio Games, told us, "When you reach that stage, you will give your best. Sometimes it may not be your day."

As they enter the world's most fiercely competitive arena, we celebrate the spirit of the Indian athletes. Our cover story, 'Hope and Glory', compiled by Senior Editor Suhani Singh, with inputs from our bureaus, profiles 11 medal hopefuls. We hope the incredible spirit of our athletes will inspire us all to rise above adversity and aim for global excellence. May this be the time when India's sportspersons break into the Olympic league like never before.

(Aroon Purie)

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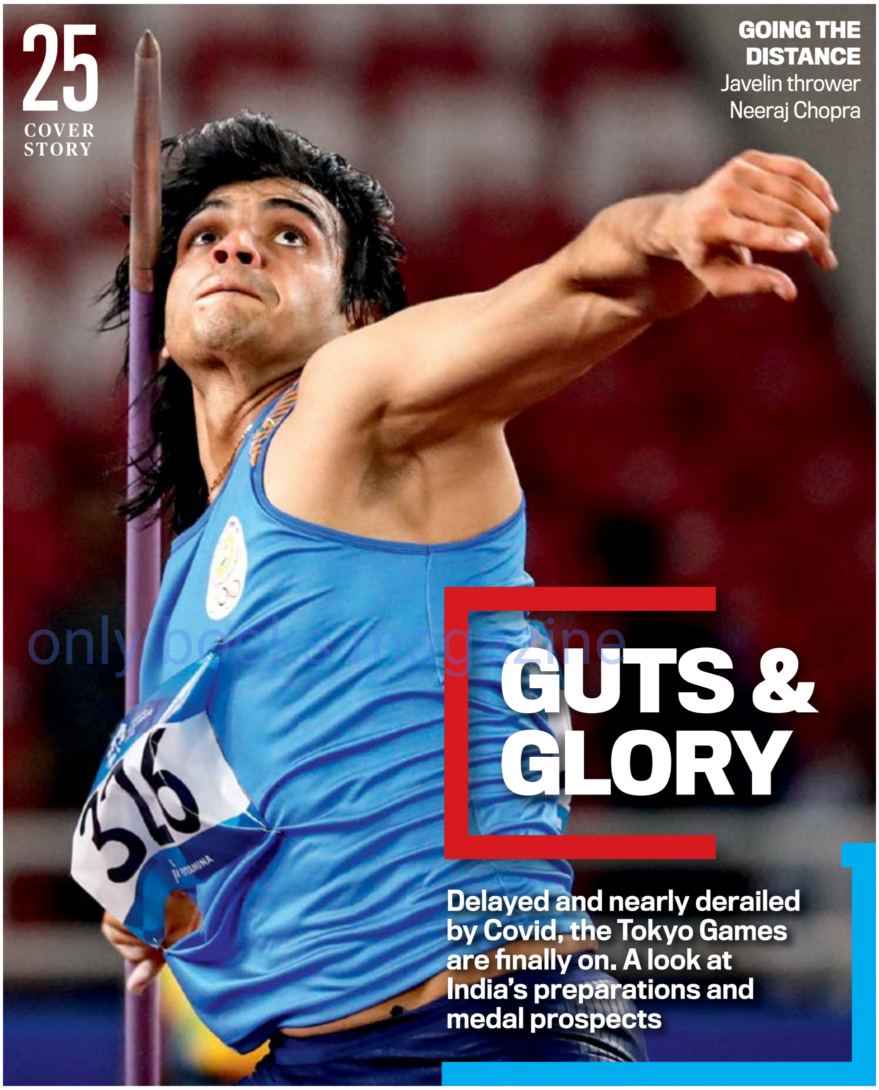

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Javelin thrower Neeraj Chopra

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Cover photograph by **BANDEEP SINGH**

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UPFRONT

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GAME PLAN
Assam CM Himanta Biswa Sarma (in brown) meets members from the state's Muslim community, June 28

MANASH DAS

ASSAM

DIVIDE AND RULE?

By Kaushik Deka

On July 4, Assam chief minister Himanta Biswa Sarma had an expansive meeting with 150 or so Muslims from various walks of life, on what he describes as "the community's socio-economic issues". At the end of the meeting, Sarma announced the formation of eight sub-groups, consisting of 'indigenous' Muslims only—on population stabilisation, cultural identity, political inclusion, financial inclusion, health, education, skill development and women's empowerment—to address said issues. The committees have three months to come up with their recommendations, which will reportedly form the basis of a new roadmap for the next five years.

Sarma's meeting, and its declared intent, have been received with scepticism in some quarters and guarded enthusiasm in others. The terms of reference do suggest that the so-called socio-economic issues—such as the politically charged one of population control—are somehow endemic to Muslims. There is also an attempt to make a distinction between the so-called 'indigenous' Muslims and immigrants from neighbouring Bangladesh—another politically charged issue. Asked what he made of all this, Wasim Ahmed, CEO of FM channel Gup Chup, who was present at the meeting, was guarded: "If it is not politically motivated, then it's a step in the right direction. It is the constitutional obligation of any government to work for the overall development and uplift of every citizen in the state, irrespective of religion."

Sarma has been vocal in advocating population control for Muslims, in particular, and iterated his firm conviction even after the Guwahati meeting: "The population explosion in some parts of Assam is a real threat to development." He had also earlier made an appeal to the community, particularly to those of immigrant origin, to practise family planning, even though his advocacy was cloaked in the logic of poverty alleviation.

There is political calculation in repeated assertions about the difference between indigenous and immigrant Muslims. At the meeting, it was again

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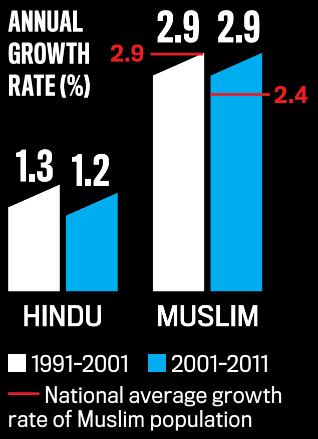
पिछले कुछ दिनों में घाटी में आतंकी हमलों में तेजी आई है. एक ओर आतंकी सेना को निशाना बना रहे हैं, तो वहीं सेना भी ऑपरेशन चला

बड़ी खबरें लाइव टीवी

IS THERE A MUSLIM POPULATION EXPLOSION IN ASSAM?

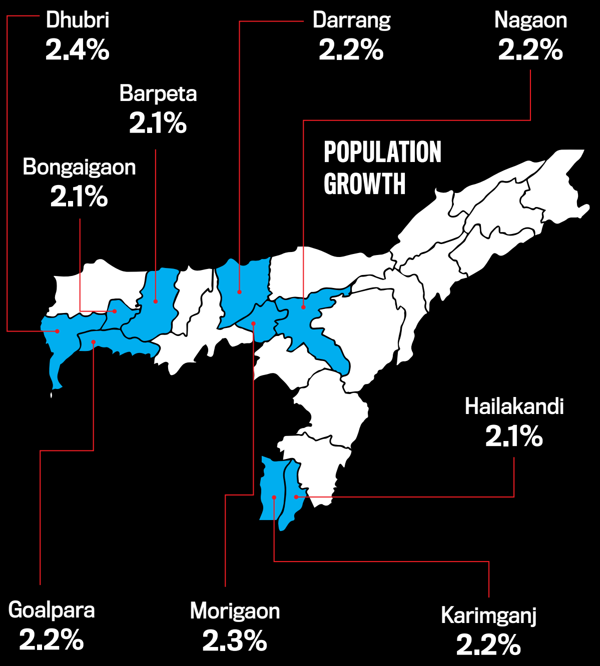
Their numbers have grown faster than the Hindus, but the growth rate in Assam is on par with the national average



Graphic by TANMOY CHAKRABORTY

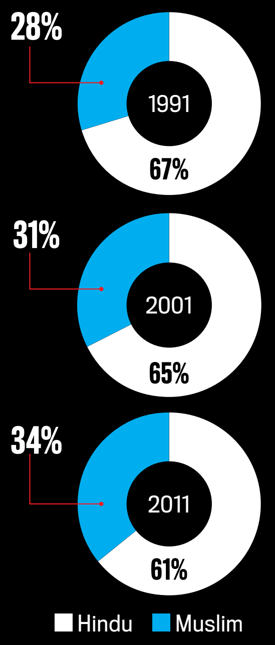
THE GEOGRAPHICAL SPREAD

The nine Muslim-majority districts (out of 34 in all) of Assam have shown a higher annual population growth than the state's average of 1.7 per cent



THE POPULATION MATRIX

Share of Muslims in Assam's total population



Source: Census 1991, 2001 & 2011

made clear that the invitees consisted only of 'indigenous Muslims'; Sarma clarified that he would meet Muslims of immigrant origin next month. He cited cultural and linguistic differences as the reason for keeping the two apart.

While those gathered at the meeting broadly agreed on the need for a dialogue with the government, the official line Sarma has drawn between these two groups has stirred concerned discussion on the communal intent of the exercise. "I welcome the meeting, but if the CM is interested in the development of the community, why did he need to segregate us?" asks Aminul Islam, an AIUDF (All India United Democratic Front) legislator from Mankachar in Western Assam (South Salmara district). Aman Wadud, a human rights activist and lawyer in the Gauhati High Court, sees the recent developments as the BJP's ploy to camouflage its anti-Muslim reputation. "It is apparent that the BJP wants to use Assamese Muslims as a means to marginalise Bengali-speaking Muslims and then claim they are not against Muslims *per se*," says Wadud.

What makes Sarma's distinction between the two sets of Muslims untenable is that there is no unanimously accepted definition of indigenous Muslims in the state. Sarma defines them as those who converted from Hinduism and those who have not migrated to Assam from across the state's geographic boundaries. He makes an exception for those who were captured or stayed back during the multiple Mughal invasions of the state.

Many Muslims dismiss this as a false distinction; they argue it's not an inclusive enough description of indigenous Muslims. "In the western border districts of Dhubri and Goalpara, for example, people speak a certain dialect known as 'desi bhasha', which is phonetically distinct but linguistically related to the Assamese currently in use. These people have been living in these regions for centuries. They are as indigenous as the rest of the Assamese-speaking Muslims," says Zerifa Wahid, a leading actor and filmmaker in Assam.

Sarma's "concern" over population increase in some of the state's Muslim-dominated areas has, however, found support in other quarters. The population in the nine Muslim-dominated districts grew annually at over 2 per cent between 2001 and 2011, as against Assam's average growth rate of 1.7 per cent. Since 1991, the annual growth rate of Muslims in the state has been around 3 per cent while the Hindu population growth rate, at just over 1 per cent, has seen a marginal dip. At 2.4 children per woman, the fertility rate among Muslims in Assam was the second highest among all states in 2019-20. But what has been missed in the political narrative is that the fertility rate has seen a consistent fall—from 3.6 in 2005-06 to 2.9 in 2015-16.

Sarma claims his rhetoric on population control is religion neutral. The recent announcement that those with more than two children will be barred from government jobs, contesting elections and availing social welfare benefits is applicable to people of all religions, not just Muslims, he says. "I'm not targeting Muslims; I'm targeting the causes that hinder their development and eventually that of the state." It's time, though, for Sarma to walk his secular talk. ■

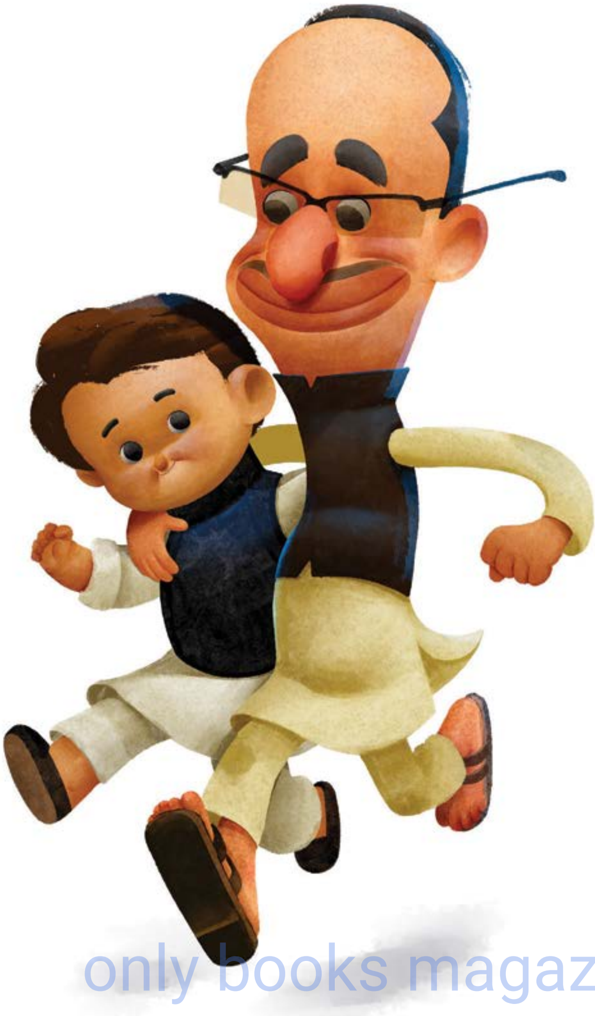


Illustration by SIDDHANT JUMDE

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GLASSHOUSE

DREAM TEAM?

The growing camaraderie between Madhya Pradesh chief minister **Shivraj Singh Chouhan** and **Jyotiraditya Scindia** has generated quite a buzz in Bhopal. Chouhan recently put out a list of minister nominees in charge of all the 52 districts in the state and it seems Scindia has ensured that districts in his bastion, the Gwalior-Chambal area, go to his loyalists, pushing out other contenders in the party. This is not a new strategy. The duo has often closed ranks to keep opponents at bay. The CM, whose band of loyalists has thinned, counts on Scindia to counter challengers in the cabinet, while Scindia banks on Chouhan to keep the powerful BJP leaders in the Gwalior region under check. But how long will this alliance last? In politics, one can never tell.

CAVERNOUS LOGIC

A lack of funds may have stalled work on the Rs 3,500 crore Chhatrapati Shivaji memorial statue near Mumbai, but the state is looking at other ways to give tourism a push and has already set aside a Rs 246 crore publicity budget for it. Among a myriad projects, Chief Minister **Uddhav Thackeray** wants to create rock-cut caves and has asked officials to survey the Western Ghats near Mumbai for this—baffling, considering Maharashtra is already home to the 2,000-year-old Ajanta caves, a UNESCO World Heritage site. Is old no longer gold?

MILIND SHELTE

–Sandeep Unnithan with Rahul Noronha, Kiran D. Tare and Amarnath K. Menon

UNIFORM OPPOSITION

Chief of Defence Staff General **Bipin Rawat** stoked controversy recently when he called the Indian Air Force (IAF) a 'support service' in a webinar and television interview. The public spat between the Indian army and the IAF over the creation of integrated military theatres, pooling in the assets of the three services, has turned into a full-blown media and social media war. But while a few army and navy veterans disagree over theatre commands, the IAF is almost uniformly opposed to the creation of military theatres. The other two services grudgingly accept the fact.

MOHAMMED ALEEMUDDIN

Bandi March

Telangana BJP president **Bandi Sanjay Kumar** will embark on a 750 km *padayatra* across the state on August 9. It will begin from Hyderabad and conclude at Huzurabad, where the by-election is due in October following the resignation of MLA Etela Rajender of the TRS. Coincidentally, former chief ministers Y.S. Rajasekhara Reddy and N. Chandrababu Naidu and the incumbent Y.S. Jagan Mohan Reddy had all relied on walkathons to get the top job. Kumar's ambitious undertaking will be a far-from-modest, four-phase affair.

ARVIND YADAV/ GETTY IMAGES

NO HOLDS BARRED Navjot Sidhu after a meeting with a Congress party panel in New Delhi, June 1

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PUNJAB/ CONGRESS

THE RETURN OF THE RENEGADE

By Anilesh S. Mahajan

On June 30, cricketer-turned-politician Navjot Singh Sidhu posted a photograph on social media in which he is seen with Congress general secretary Priyanka Gandhi. The two had reportedly had a four-hour meeting, and the photograph was to serve as some kind of evidence that he had the ear of the Gandhi siblings Priyanka and Rahul.

The photo-op was not without political significance, and does count for something in his current row with the Punjab chief minister Capt. Amarinder Singh, given specially that he was initially denied audience by the Congress first family. (Sonia Gandhi later met the Captain on July 6).

In his home state, Sidhu has the image of being ambitious, impetuous and an eternal rebel. His Twitter bio says 'Master of All Trades, Jack of None', a 'Sidhuism' that pretty much summarises the arc of his public life, from flashy cricketer to oddball commentator to reality show judge to part-time actor to *Big Boss* contender to mainstream politician. A cricket star from Punjab's affluent Jat Sikh community, he was an instant crowd-puller in politics, and the BJP used him well for some 13 years till he jumped ship and joined the Congress. Indeed, his oratorical flair is the reason why the Congress makes the extra effort to accommodate him, for Sidhu has few loyalists among the 83 party legislators in the state (ex-India hockey captain and MLA Pargat Singh being the lone exception).

> **Sidhu's oratorical skills are why the Congress makes the extra effort to accommodate him; he has few friends among the 83 party MLAs in Punjab**

Amarinder has made it clear to the AICC (All India Congress Committee) panel that he will not accept Sidhu as the state unit chief or as deputy chief minister. "My doors are closed for him," says the chief minister while insinuating that Sidhu could leave the Congress for the Aam Aadmi Party (AAP).

Sidhu's list of Amarinder's wrongdoings include alleged collusion with the Badals of the opposition Shiromani Akali Dal (SAD) and not doing enough on issues like the farm debt waiver, the 2015 Guru Granth Sahib sacrilege case, high electricity tariffs and the drug menace in the state.

PLAYING FOR THE TURN?

1983 Dubbed 'strokeless wonder' after disastrous Test debut

1987 Makes a comeback, now nicknamed 'Sixer Sidhu'

1988 Embroiled in a road rage case in hometown Patiala

1996 Walks out of England tour after spat with Indian cricket team captain Mohammad Azharuddin; faces 50-day ban

1999 Turns TV commentator after retirement; quickly earns a reputation for his eccentric one-liners, a.k.a. 'Sidhuisms

2004 Becomes MP from Amritsar on a BJP ticket

2006 Punjab & Haryana High Court convicts Sidhu in road rage case. Resigns from Lok Sabha; his conviction is later suspended

2006 Manhandles then president of BJP state unit Avinash Rai Khanna

2007 Gets re-elected in LS bypoll

2014 Arun Jaitley replaces Sidhu as BJP candidate from Amritsar

2016 BJP nominates Sidhu to Rajya Sabha. Months later, he quits party and Rajya Sabha; joins Congress

2017 Wins from Amritsar East and joins Amarinder Singh government

2018 Takes flak for hugging Pakistan army chief Qamar Javed Bajwa and later, despite the Centre/state government saying no, goes to Kartarpur in his individual capacity

2019 Quits Amarinder government after his portfolio is changed

2021 Starts his campaign against the Amarinder Singh government

Will Amarinder call a truce?

Several ministers in Punjab have confirmed to INDIA TODAY that Rahul Gandhi specifically asked them about the political risk in replacing Amarinder. One proposal Rahul had was to make Sidhu state party chief and one of the Congress satraps the new chief minister with two deputies. Another option reportedly being considered is to contest the assembly election "without a CM face".

Punjab is crucial for the Congress as it is one of only three states where the party is currently in power, the other two being Rajasthan and Chhattisgarh. It had also successfully repulsed the 'Modi wave' in the 2014 and 2019 general elections as well as the 2017 assembly poll. The 2022 election outcome could impact the party's prospects outside the state too (in faction-ridden Rajasthan and Chhattisgarh).

"It will require great political skill to have two swords live in a single sheath," says a top Congress leader about the Amarinder-Sidhu battle. "No colonel can become a general overnight. Everyone has to wait for their chance. We have left this (Sidhu's elevation) to the high command," says Pratap Singh Bajwa, Rajya Sabha MP and himself a contender should there be a change at the top. Bajwa, in fact, has been a thorn in Amarinder's side for a lot longer than Sidhu.

With the election just months away, any further delays in resolving the situation could hurt the Congress's prospects. In the last week of June, all the Hindu Congress MLAs gathered at Amarinder's place and told him that any plans to elevate Sidhu would not go down well with the Hindu electorate. This pertains to the people's mood after the drone attack at the Jammu airport and Sidhu's special 'friendship' with Pakistan PM Imran Khan.

Congress insiders also say that it is risky to back Sidhu for the top position in Punjab. "He doesn't have administrative experience, and in his 17-year political career has shown no signs of being a team player," says a minister in Punjab who did not want to be named. There is lots of opposition to Amarinder too, but that does not mean support for Sidhu. "He is impulsive and given to extreme emotional reactions," says Ashutosh Kumar, who teaches political science at Panjab University. Despite repeated attempts, Sidhu refused to comment on his plans and prospects.

Sidhu has a reputation of being an impulsive hothead. Back in 2006, when he was lobbying to become the BJP state unit chief, he allegedly manhandled senior party leader Avinash Rai Khanna at the Amritsar airport. The late BJP leader Arun Jaitley saved him at the time, but in 2014 Sidhu fell out with him too over the Amritsar Lok Sabha seat. This was also the time he turned against the Badals—who were, in his own words, like "extended family"—apparently because Sukhbir Badal sided with brother-in-law Bikram Majithia in the Amritsar turf war. Just before the 2017 assembly poll, Sidhu quit the BJP.

After shifting to the Congress, Sidhu completely changed his politics. He started talking more about his Sikh identity and, despite objections from Amarinder Singh and the Centre, went to Pakistan, first to be part of Imran Khan's swearing-in ceremony and then for the opening of the Kartarpur Sahib corridor. Of course, on both occasions, he played to the gallery and even tried to take credit for the opening of the Kartarpur corridor.

Sidhu, the MLA from Amritsar East, resigned from Amarinder's cabinet in July 2019, ostensibly because his portfolio had been changed. But he had been badmouthing the chief minister even during the general election campaign, and it was only a matter of time before Amarinder bore down on him.

Sidhu also changed his tune when Amarinder started playing the nationalist card by alerting the central agencies of misuse of the Kartarpur corridor by the ISI, and supporting the Balakot strikes. But the resurgence of the sacrilege issue has caught Amarinder on the backfoot. The chief minister also seems to have lost support among his legislators, including some of his confidants. Six ministers refused to attend the cabinet meeting on June 3. Later, the chief minister had one-on-one meetings with all his ministers to sort out "irritants".

These ministers and legislators may be upset with Amarinder, but they are no fans of Sidhu either. Ludhiana MP Ravneet Bittu has opposed him vehemently, and so have other party MPs from the state. The party high command already has a tough job keeping the warring factions together in Punjab. Throwing Sidhu into the mix may make the job even tougher and could even lead to a split in the Congress state unit. ■

UTTARAKHAND BJP

NOBODY'S ENEMY

Why the BJP has gone for newbie Dhami

By Anilesh S. Mahajan

Pushkar Singh Dhami's appointment as chief minister marks a generational shift for the BJP in its crisis-ridden hill turf of Uttarakhand. The decision to replace Tirath Singh Rawat, who had spent barely four months at the helm, with the 45-year-old Dhami, a two-term MLA from Khatima in the Kumaon region, comes just eight months before the assembly election and has predictably upset the many factions within the state BJP.

Uttarakhand goes to polls next February and Dhami has no time to effect major changes. His biggest challenge will arguably be to keep factionalism in check and to shore up the image of the party ahead of the election. He will also have to be seen to be doing something about reviving tourism—the mainstay of the state's economy—and creating jobs in tourism, hospitality and other sectors hit hard by the pandemic. Getting on with the 890 km Char Dham project, to improve road connectivity between the Kedarnath, Badrinath, Yamunotri and Gangotri shrines, will be another top priority. To speed up projects, Sukhbir Singh Sandhu has been appointed as the state's new chief secretary. The 1988 batch IAS officer is known for his ability to deliver.

Dhami will also have to handle the agitation against the Char Dham Devasthanam Board, which was

18
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आजतक

constituted to manage the Char Dham shrines and other temples in the state. The creation of the board has not only irked the Char Dham priests but also RSS leaders and affiliates of the Sangh.

The Dhami government will also have to work on dispelling a growing perception in the Kumaon belt that most development funds are going to the Garhwal region. Having a Rajput leader from Kumaon as chief minister (both Tirath Rawat and his predecessor Trivendra Singh Rawat are from Garhwal) should help. In the 70-member state assembly, the two hill regions are represented by 30 MLAs each; the remaining 10 come from the plains.

WHY TIRATH RAWAT HAD TO GO

Tirath Rawat's short tenure, beginning March 10, was mired in controversies. The Lok Sabha MP from Garhwal faced sharp criticism for holding the Kumbh Mela in Haridwar in the midst of the second Covid wave. His all-too-frequent loose-cannon remarks—on women wearing 'ripped jeans'; on 'America' enslaving India; on Prime Minister Narendra Modi being akin to Ram and Krishna—didn't help either. Nor did he have much success re-energising the party cadre, who were reportedly feeling unhappy and demoralised since the days of his predecessor Trivendra Singh Rawat.

But unlike his two predecessors, who have both served as state BJP chief, Dhami has not previously held a prominent position in the party. Before being anointed chief minister, the only notable post he held was as president of the state BJP's youth wing. It remains to be seen how Dhami overcomes this comparative lack of organisational experience while dealing with party matters.

The BJP will certainly hope that Dhami is able to overcome—and possibly compensate for—his inexperience in running the administration and the party organisation. On the brighter side for the party, he carries less baggage—and, by that token, may have fewer enemies in the party. A top central leader of the BJP confirmed that in order to fight anti-incumbency in the state, the party will consider younger candidates, even at the expense of old war horses. The BJP had tried this in the run-up to elections in Delhi (1998) and Uttarakhand (2012). In Delhi, the party had appointed the late Sushma Swaraj as chief minister just before the polls while B.C. Khanduri was put in charge six months ahead of elections. It's another matter that the BJP lost on both occasions.

CAN DHAMI PULL IT OFF?

Dhami is considered to be close to the Union defence minister Rajnath Singh. Before joining the BJP, he was a full-timer in the RSS youth wing, the Akhil Bharatiya Vidyarthi Parishad (ABVP), working as joint secretary in the Uttaranchal unit. Political observers, however, question Dhami's ability to handle the pulls and pressures of chief ministership. They point out that he hasn't even once served as a minister in the four and a half years of the party's current rule in Uttarakhand.

In terms of administrative experience, Dhami was OSD (officer on special duty) to former state chief minister Bhagat Singh Koshyari (2001-02). Within the BJP, he is considered a soft-spoken grassroots leader who has worked closely with Singh, while he was chief minister of Uttar Pradesh, and later with the party's CMs in Uttarakhand, as their backroom boy.

As chief minister, Dhami will suddenly have to deal with state BJP heavyweights such as tourism minister Satpal Maharaj, party president Madan Kaushik, former CMs Trivendra Rawat, Ramesh Pokhriyal and Vijay Bahuguna and MLA Harak Singh Rawat. Leaders of warring BJP factions are also being wooed by the opposition Congress and AAP (Aam Aadmi Party).

Opening channels with the various camps in the party, Dhami held a meeting with Satpal Maharaj and the former chief ministers on July 4, the day he assumed office. He has retained the entire cabinet of Tirath Rawat, and is keeping a low profile with his messaging. "The BJP has several competent leaders to lead the government. Some have better credentials and capabilities than me. They are my seniors—the onus is on me to take them along and seek their blessings and support," he said.

The BJP may have taken a big risk by betting on Dhami, but his appointment is also a message to the warring factions that they could be sidelined unless they fall in line. That too is a bit of a desperate gamble, late in the day, because disgruntled senior leaders in the party might weigh their options and consider alternatives. The BJP will obviously hope for a different outcome: by betting on the newbie Dhami, it might unsettle old equations, old rivalries and force realignments. ■

ARUN PARDESHI

GENERATIONAL SHIFT
Pushkar Singh Dhami with supporters in Dehradun, July 3

NANDAN DAVE

COUNTING THEIR LOSSES Fishermen in Una, Gujarat, assess the damage caused to their boats from Cyclone Tauktae, May 18; (inset) Parshottam Solanki

GUJARAT BJP

A BREWING STORM

By Kiran D. Tare

Around a hundred prominent Koli leaders of Gujarat went into a huddle in Saurashtra's Bhavnagar in late June to discuss the 'welfare and development' of fisherfolk in the state. Convening under the aegis of the All Koli Samaj of Gujarat, they decided to hold a grand convention to press their political demands, including a wider representation for Kolis in the state government. The meeting assumes particular significance given the resentment brewing in the community against the ruling BJP.

The Kolis have been angry with the Vijay Rupani government ever since Cyclone Tauktae hit the Gujarat coast on May 18, causing massive devastation that badly hit their livelihoods. According to the state government, 187 small and 807 large fishing boats, of an estimated total of 20,000 boats in the state, were damaged. On June 3, the Rupani government announced a relief package of Rs 105 crore for fishermen, of which Rs 25 crore was to cover the cost of repairing/ replacing damaged fishing boats and equipment. The rest is to be spent on restoring marine infrastructure damaged by the cyclone.

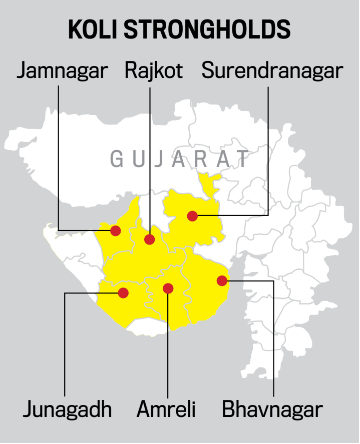
Koli leaders say more funds should have been allocated to provide relief to the fishermen. The state government has announced an ex gratia payment of Rs 2,000 each for people who lost their homes in the cyclone. "This is peanuts. Just a new roof will cost about Rs 15,000," says Kanhaiyalal Kamariya, a fisherman from Amreli.

BJP ON THE BACKFOOT

Looking to cash in on the resentment among fellow Kolis, fisheries minister Parshottam Solanki has opened a front against the chief minister. Solanki, a heavyweight Koli leader, has demanded the post of deputy chief minister for his community. He criticised the 'inadequate' cyclone relief, skipped a cabinet meeting on June 22 and declared that his ministerial berth was of no use if he was unable to get justice for the fishermen affected by the cyclone.

Solanki's attack has caused a flutter in the ruling BJP as it is aware that dissatisfaction among the Kolis could hurt the party's prospects in the assembly election due in December next year. Politically in the shadows since 2018 due to his poor health, the cyclone relief row has given Solanki a way to bounce back. A close aide says Solanki is actively considering an agitation by the Kolis for their political demands. The schedule and contours of the agitation

WHY KOLIS MATTER


KOLI STRONGHOLDS

22

Koli MLAs in Gujarat assembly (BJP 12, Congress 10)

45

Assembly seats in Saurashtra where Patidars and Kolis are dominant

Graphic by TANMOY CHAKRABORTY

are not clear. Solanki has possibly taken his cue from the Hardik Patel-led Patidar quota stir that hit the BJP hard in the 2017 assembly election. The party returned to power but with a reduced majority, down to 99 seats in the 182-member assembly against the 117 it had won in 2012.

Their numbers give the Kolis political salience. Constituting about 40 per cent of the OBC (Other Backward Class) population in Gujarat, they have been a key BJP vote bank. They make up around 22 per cent of the state's 60 million people. Saurashtra and northern Gujarat are their strongholds. The urban Kolis in northern Gujarat call themselves Thakor. The Kolis can influence the poll outcome in four of Gujarat's 26 Lok Sabha seats and 12 assembly seats. Currently the state assembly has 22 Koli MLAs—12 in the BJP and the rest in the Congress.

The successes of the Patidar agitation have reignited the Kolis' political aspirations. The demand for a Koli deputy chief minister has been a longstanding one. Raju Solanki, leader of the Veer Mandhata Koli Samaj, says unlike the Patidars, the Kolis are not demanding the chief minister's post, but being the largest OBC community, they have a right to the deputy CM's post. "The chief minister can belong to any section of the society but should be sensitive to the aspirations of the people of Gujarat," says Raju Solanki.

In Saurashtra, which sends 58 MLAs to the state assembly, the Patidars and Kolis together influence about 45 seats. The Kolis were traditionally Congress supporters till 1998. The party's former chief minister, Madhavsinh Solanki, had once insisted that Kolis be called Kshatriya. The community was a key constituent of the KHAM (Kshatriya, Harijan, Adivasi, Muslim) formula propounded by Madhavsinh in the late 1970s. The BJP's rise in Gujarat in the late 1980s changed this. Shankersinh Vaghela, a Rajput leader, and Somabhai Patel, a Koli, pulled the Kolis and other OBC segments into the BJP fold. In 1985, Somabhai was the first Koli leader to win an assembly election on a BJP ticket. Since then, the Kolis have largely voted for the BJP.

Political observers say it will be difficult for Parshottam Solanki to mobilise the Kolis against the BJP. Shirish Kashikar, director, National Institute of Mass Communication and Journalism, Ahmedabad, says Solanki is trying to exploit the emotive cyclone relief issue to get his demands heard. "As a minister in the Keshubhai Patel and Narendra Modi governments, Solanki used similar tactics. Earlier, the BJP would reach out to him, but now it appears unmoved."

DAMAGE CONTROL

If the BJP has so far resisted the pressure, it is due to its strong footing among the Kolis. Over the past couple of years, to sideline Solanki, the party has strategically inducted other influential Koli leaders into the cabinet or raised their stature. Among them is water supply minister Kunvarji Bavaliya, who left the Congress in 2018 and is now a key Koli face in the BJP.

The BJP has also promoted Koli leader Bharatiben Shiyal as the party's national vice-president. Shiyal represents Parshottam Solanki's turf Bhavnagar in the Lok Sabha. BJP insiders cite the rise of Mahendrabhai Munjpara, the Lok Sabha MP from Surendranagar, as an example of the party's diminishing dependency on Solanki. Munjpara was a novice when fielded in the 2019 general election but won by 217,000 votes.

Darshan Solanki, a BJP sympathiser in Ahmedabad, says the party has more or less lured away the Congress leadership in Saurashtra, the bastion of Kolis. "All influential Koli leaders from Saurashtra have switched from the Congress to the BJP in the past few years. So even if the Kolis are upset with the BJP, the Congress is hardly in a position to take advantage," he says.

Kashikar says community-based politics has been on an upswing in Gujarat from the time AAP (Aam Aadmi Party) made inroads into Surat this February. Riding on the support of the Patidars, AAP won 27 of the 120 seats in the Surat Municipal Corporation elections. "Every community has started aspiring to a bigger share in power and is organising meetings to assert itself. The Kolis are no exception," says Kashikar.

Chief Minister Rupani has not yet responded to Solanki's demands. His aides say Rupani is confident that his minister's 'rebellion' will fizzle out for lack of support. The Kolis, though, are unlikely to relent before some of their political demands are met or concessions extended by the state government. With the assembly election round the corner, they are a vote bank Rupani and the BJP cannot afford to take their eyes off. ■

ANI

BACK IN CHARGE West Bengal CM Mamata Banerjee at a press conference at Nabanna on June 28

MAMATA BANERJEE

REFORM AND REPOSITION

By Romita Datta

There's a sense of urgent purpose in the way Mamata Banerjee is approaching her new term in office. Two months into her third term on the trot, the West Bengal chief minister has already rolled out several initiatives the Trinamool Congress (TMC) had promised in its poll manifesto.

These include new welfare projects, including '*duare* ration', to deliver rations to people's doorsteps; '*lokkhir bhandar*', which gives housewives Rs 6,000 in annual support payments (Rs 12,000 for women from SC/ ST communities); a Rs 10 lakh credit line for students seeking higher education; and '*duare tran*', to deliver relief payments to victims of cyclone Yaas. These follow the template of the '*duare sarkar*' programme her government ran before the assembly election, to improve delivery of government services by cutting out middlemen and thereby reducing corruption. Some benefits are already visible—for instance, the *duare* ration scheme reveals the state has 104 million registered ration cards, despite the official population being closer to 90 million.

During the assembly campaign, Mamata had vowed to reform the TMC if she returned to power, saying, "The only alternative to the TMC is a reformed TMC." Her post-poll manoeuvres give the impression that this effort is in full swing. For one, she has created a separation between party and government—under a new 'one-person-one-post' rule, TMC leaders are banned from holding multiple posts, or from holding posts in both the government and the party organisation. Sources say she was willing to relinquish her own party post to set an example, but relented after party leaders asked her to make an exception for herself.

The '*duare*' schemes are a major part of her effort to reform the delivery of government services. The cyclone relief programme *duare tran*, for instance, was implemented after allegations of large-scale corruption in the distribution of relief material for those affected by cyclone Amphan in May last year. Sources say it has helped identify bogus claims—for instance, upon physical verification of damaged homes, the claims were found to be inflated by 60 per cent—against the original claims list of 300,000, only 140,000 were found to be bona fide.

Mamata has also been pushing to ensure that the TMC's victory in the assembly polls does not result in complacency. During the election campaign, the BJP did its worst to paint the picture of a highly corrupt government. There were allegations of a '*bua-bhatija* (aunt-nephew) syndicate' and a '*tolabaazi* tax', referring to the alleged culture of demanding bribes to pass on welfare benefits. In her third term, Mamata has been trying to hammer home the message of zero tolerance to corruption. There have been some concrete developments on this front, including the transfer of food and supplies minister Jyotipriyo Mullick to the forest department as a result of the many complaints of corruption in his department.

On this issue, Mamata has also specifically mentioned cow and coal smuggling—an investigation into these by the CBI (Central Bureau of Investigation) suggested links to top TMC members, including Abhishek Banerjee's wife Rujira and Youth TMC leader Vinay Mishra, who is reportedly close to Abhishek. Some see this as Mamata's way of cautioning her nephew to keep his distance from those involved in corruption. "Mamata's diktat was for one and all, but her talk of cow smuggling and illegal coal mining shows she is particularly annoyed with her family's name appearing in these cases," says a senior TMC leader, on condition of anonymity.

Another effort to burnish the TMC's image has been Mamata's response to the post-poll violence in the state. Even as the BJP accuses the TMC of turning a blind eye to this, Mamata has come across as non-partisan in her government's effort to compensate victims. For instance, family members of the four Muslims who died when CISF (Central Industrial Security Force) personnel opened fire on protesters in Sitalkuchi during polling on April 10 have been given government jobs, as have family members of a BJP worker who died in a clash with unidentified assailants. Mamata has also avoided announcements that could be construed as communal. For instance, her sanction of six medical colleges and the recruitment of 32,000 teachers, the doubling of assistance to farmers under the Krishak Bandhu scheme and initiatives like *duare* ration or the students' credit card give little scope for the BJP to accuse her of appeasement politics. "Religion has never been our priority," says TMC Rajya Sabha MP Sukhendu Sekhar Ray, adding that Mamata Banerjee's "politics of inclusion" is manifest in her welfare projects and the party's '*Ma-Maati-Manush*' slogan.

When it comes to her national ambitions, Mamata Banerjee's landslide victory in the assembly election—against the full might of the BJP—has certainly bolstered her claim to lead the opposition in 2024. So, if she is making haste in rejigging party affairs and trying to set the tone for reinvigorated, responsive governance, it is also because she wants to quickly free up political bandwidth to focus on the national project. With her nephew Abhishek installed as national general secretary of the TMC and former aide Mukul Roy back in the party, she has given herself that stretch room.

Mamata's win in the assembly poll against the full might of the BJP has bolstered her claim to lead the national opposition in 2024

While some political leaders have long supported her—for instance, the Aam Aadmi Party's Arvind Kejriwal, the Shiv Sena's Uddhav Thackeray, the Samajwadi Party's Akhilesh Yadav and the DMK's M.K. Stalin—others, including Kerala chief minister and CPI(M) politburo member Pinarayi Vijayan and the Biju Janata Dal's Naveen Patnaik have been in touch with her about national issues like the procurement of Covid-19 vaccines and their distribution.

For some time now, Mamata has been more visible on the national stage, especially on issues of pan-India significance. On the new farm laws, for example, she was among the Centre's most vocal critics. She even sent party MPs, led by Derek O'Brien, to express solidarity with farmers during the agitation in New Delhi. Rakesh Tikait, spokesperson of the Bharatiya Kisan Union, one of the major groups involved in the agitation, met with her in Kolkata on June 9, asking her to put together a strong opposition to the BJP. "Tikait, aware of Mamata's famous farmland movement, has sought her help," says Purnendu Bose, newly appointed president of the TMC's farmers' wing, the Khet Mazdoor Union. "When it comes to [pro-farmer] agitations, Mamata Banerjee's hunger strike for the Singur farmers is a historical milestone." There have also been hints that the TMC will lean on farmers' unions to mark its presence in states like Uttar Pradesh, Haryana and Punjab.

The TMC has already engaged veteran leader Yashwant Sinha to lobby in Delhi and scout for allies by floating an apolitical platform, the Rashtriya Manch. "Involving senior leaders from different parties to build consensus on opposing the BJP shows that Mamata's strategy has matured," says Prasanta Ray, a social scientist. "This is unlike 2019, when she did all the running around for a *mahagathbandhan* show, giving the impression that she was angling for a leadership role." That effort crumbled for several reasons, including the fact that it was a loose, disparate, hastily contrived alliance, cobbled together barely months before the general election. This time around, it appears Mamata has decided on a slow but steady approach. With the #BengaliPrimeMinister hashtag now doing the rounds on social media, it appears she is off to a good start. ■

ANI

DECODING MODI'S MEGA MAKEOVER

The cabinet overhaul was an exercise in rewarding performers and getting fresh talent to ensure delivery of promises. It was also about representation to electorally significant interest groups and building a next-gen leadership

BY RAJ CHENGAPPA AND ANILESH S. MAHAJAN

HAVING A WORD
The PM meets BJP MPs at his residence ahead of the cabinet expansion, Jul. 7

Never in his seven years as prime minister had Narendra Modi looked as vulnerable as he did at the peak of the second wave of Covid-19 this May. The pandemic struck with a ferocity that caught his government flat-footed. As the death toll mounted, compounded by a criminal shortage of medical oxygen, Modi and his government's credibility were severely dented. With states imposing rolling lockdowns, the economy slipped further into the doldrums. People across the country were truly hurting. The Bharatiya Janata Party's ignominious defeat in the high-stakes battle for the West Bengal assembly strengthened the perception that the Modi government was running out of momentum. This was barely two years after Modi won a historic second term with back-to-back majorities in Parliament, firmly cementing his aura of invincibility. The situation had changed for the worse in no time.

Sensing that it was a now or never moment, Modi did what he does best—convert adversity into opportunity. He turned a routine cabinet expansion into a mega makeover of Team Modi, designed to meet several major imperatives. The first was that having initiated the second generation of economic reforms to transform the country, it was crucial that his government delivered on its plans and promises before losing the plot altogether. That meant cutting out the deadwood and revamping his cabinet to introduce a new energy and dynamism that could help his government meet the daunting challenges.

So, in a signal to the rest of his colleagues that performance matters, he axed seven veteran cabinet ministers, asking them to resign before the expansion. Among them were ministers who held two crucial portfolios: the health minister Dr Harsh Vardhan, and the education minister Ramesh Pokhriyal. Both were seen as unable to effectively deal with the challenges their respective ministries faced. That Modi meant business was evident in his dropping two high-profile ministers: Prakash Javadekar and Ravi Shankar Prasad, who held multiple key portfolios between them. They ostensibly resigned so that they could be drafted for party work, but the need for fresh talent was evident. Others were asked to resign for their somewhat lacklustre performance or advancing age. Among these were D.V. Sadananda Gowda, who held the chemicals and fertilisers portfolio; Thawarchand Gehlot, who held social justice; and Santosh Gangwar, who was the minister of state for labour and employment.

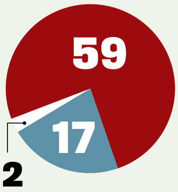
Good performers, on the other hand, were rewarded, as Modi elevated seven ministers of state as cabinet ministers: Hardeep Singh Puri, Raj Kumar Singh, Anurag Thakur, Kiren Rijiju, Mansukh Mandaviya, G. Kishan Reddy and Parshottam Rupala. Simultaneously, he injected fresh blood into his cabinet by inducting two former chief ministers—Assam's Sarbananda Sonowal and Maharashtra's Narayan Rane—and a former Union minister, Jyotiraditya Scindia, who had defected to the BJP from the Congress 16 months ago. Modi also appointed two rising stars—Bhupender Yadav and Ashwini Vaishnaw—as cabinet ministers. The inclusion of three others—Virendra Kumar,

TEAM MODI VERSION 2.0

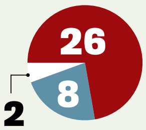
THE MEGA CABINET OF PRIME MINISTER NARENDRA MODI DECODED IN NUMBERS AND GEOGRAPHICAL REPRESENTATION

TOTAL MINISTERS	78
CABINET MINISTERS	31
MINISTER OF STATE (INDEPENDENT CHARGE)	2
MINISTER OF STATE	45
NEW FACES	36

OF THE ENTIRE UNION CABINET



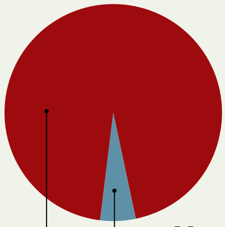
OF 36 NEW MINISTERS



● Lok Sabha members
● Rajya Sabha members
○ Not a member of any House

No. of women in the Union cabinet
11

No. of women among new inductees
6



Ministers from BJP
74

Ministers from NDA allies
4

THE REJIG HISTORY

The July 7 cabinet reshuffle is the biggest since PM Modi took charge in 2014

	● Total	● New ministers	● Elevated	● Dropped
May 2014	45	NA	NA	NA
Nov. 2014	66	21	NA	NA
July 2016	75	19	1	5
Sep. 2017	76	9	4	6
May 2019	58	23	2	22
July 2021	78	36	7	12

PROMOTED MINISTERS

ANURAG THAKUR, *Information & Broadcasting; Sports & Youth Affairs*

Reason: A close confidant of Amit Shah. His elevation may take him away from Himachal politics, easing up Chief Minister Jai Ram Thakur's problems

RAJ KUMAR SINGH, *Power; New & Renewable Energy*

Reason: In the absence of Radha Mohan Singh and Rajiv Pratap Rudy in the cabinet, he is emerging as the BJP's new Thakur face from Bihar. With ally JD(U) bringing in R.C.P. Singh, another bureaucrat-turned-politician from his community, R.K. Singh's elevation had become necessary for the BJP

G. KISHAN REDDY, *Culture; Tourism; Development of North Eastern Region*

Reason: The party's face in Telangana where the BJP has expansion plans. Has ABVP background. His elevation is expected to help woo ex-ABVP leaders in the TDP, TRS and Congress in Telangana to the BJP

PARSHOTTAM RUPALA, *Fisheries, Animal Husbandry and Dairying*

Reason: A prominent Patel leader from Gujarat and a performer. His promotion is a reachout to the community still jittery over the quota issue

MANSUKH L. MANDAVIYA, *Health & Family Welfare; Chemicals & Fertilisers*

Reason: A performer who executed reforms in ports and shipping as MoS (independent charge). During the second Covid wave, he was among the ministers tasked with augmenting manufacturing/ import of critical drugs and oxygen

HARDEEP SINGH PURI, *Petroleum & Natural Gas; Housing & Urban Affairs*

Reason: He pushed the Central Vista and new Parliament project. The only Sikh face in the Modi government, his rise is crucial to attract urban Sikh voters in Punjab and Delhi

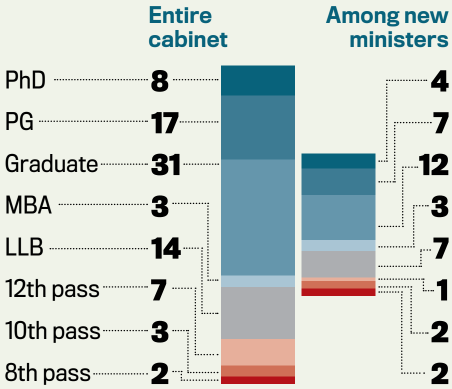
KIREN RIJIJU, *Law & Justice*

Reason: Performed as MoS Home. He is the party's Buddhist and Northeast face

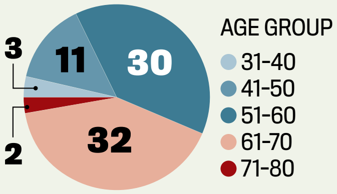
PROFESSIONALS IN UNION CABINET

	● Entire cabinet	● Among new ministers
IAS	4	2
IFS	2	0
Indian Army	1	0
Doctors	5	4
Veterinary doctor	1	0
CA	1	0

HOW QUALIFIED ARE MODI MINISTERS?



HOW YOUNG IS THE MODI CABINET?



Youngest minister
NISITH PRAMANIK
35 years

Oldest minister
SOM PRAKASH
72 years

HOW RICH ARE MODI'S MINISTERS?

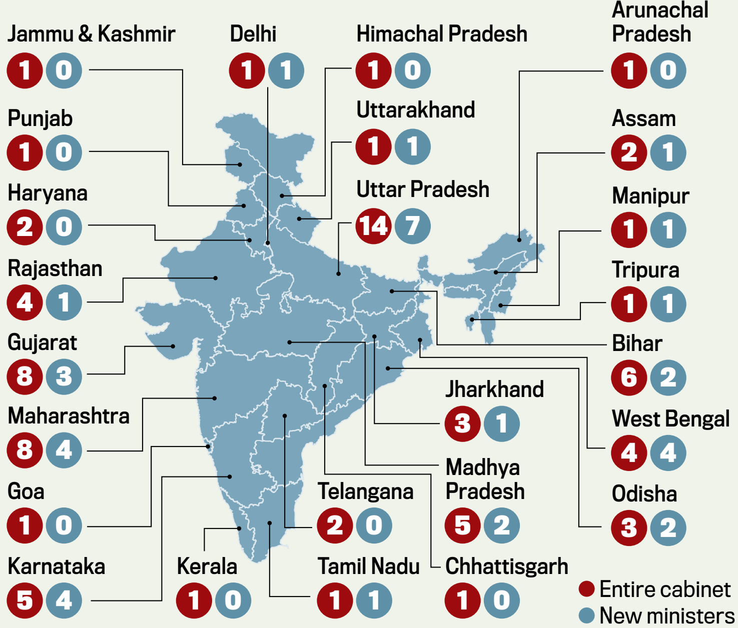
Average wealth of a minister in the cabinet **₹17 CRORE**

Average wealth of the new ministers **₹20 CRORE**

Richest minister
JYOTIRADITYA SCINDIA
Assets worth
Rs 379 crore

Poorest minister
JOHN BARLA
Assets worth
Rs 14 lakh

GEOGRAPHICAL SPREAD


Jammu & Kashmir
1 0
Delhi
1 1
Himachal Pradesh
1 0
Arunachal Pradesh
1 0
Punjab
1 0
Uttarakhand
1 1
Assam
2 1
Haryana
2 0
Uttar Pradesh
14 7
Manipur
1 1
Rajasthan
4 1
Tripura
1 1
Gujarat
8 3
Bihar
6 2
Jharkhand
3 1
Maharashtra
8 4
West Bengal
4 4
Madhya Pradesh
5 2
Goa
1 0
Telangana
2 0
Odisha
3 2
Karnataka
5 4
Kerala
1 0
Tamil Nadu
1 1
Chhattisgarh
1 0
● Entire cabinet
● New ministers

Graphics by TANMOY CHAKRABORTY

Pashupati Kumar Paras and Ramchandra Prasad Singh—reflects political compulsions and the need to accommodate allies. Virendra Kumar, a BJP MP, has been included as a prominent Dalit face.

The second big imperative before Modi was to bring greater synergy among ministries by rationalising the portfolios. Before the revamp, at least 10 cabinet ministers had charge of two or more disparate portfolios, which was certainly not conducive to good governance. Modi has now made a conscious effort to create virtuous clusters as well as leverage their individual competencies. Dharmendra Pradhan, for instance, while replacing Pokhriyal as the new education minister, was also given charge of skill development. This is important because, so far, skill development was given stepmotherly treatment despite it being a vital link between education and employment. Mandaviya was not only given the all-important health portfolio, but, in a departure, was also made the minister of chemicals and fertilisers. Since pharmaceuticals fall under the chemicals department, and given the need for vaccines and drugs to treat Covid, Mandaviya can now deal with the health challenges posed by the pandemic more effectively. It might have been even better had the fertiliser component been shifted to the agriculture ministry. Piyush Goyal was divested of railways but retained charge of commerce and industry, and food and public distribution.

> **WHILE THE MINISTERS WILL NO DOUBT FUNCTION UNDER MODI'S SHADOW, IT IS IMPORTANT THEY ARE MORE VISIBLE AND VOCAL ABOUT THEIR WORK. EACH ONE NEEDS TO BE A CHAMPION OF THEIR OWN MINISTRY IF THE PM'S MAJOR OVERHAUL IS TO ACHIEVE ITS OBJECTIVES**

In addition, he was given textiles.

Some ministers still have odd clusters of ministries, but these have been justified given the wide range of competence of the ministers who have been put in charge. So the new railways minister Vaishnaw was also given charge of the ministry of electronics and information technology and telecommunications because the former IAS officer, Wharton School of Business and IIT Kanpur alumnus is known to have proficiency in these areas. Hardeep Singh Puri, who retained the housing and urban affairs portfolio, was given additional charge of the petroleum ministry because of his background in the foreign service, which may come in handy while negotiating major oil deals. Former Assam chief minister Sonowal has become the minister for ports, shipping and waterways, given the importance of waterways trade between India and Bangladesh. He has also been given charge of the Ayush ministry because of his interest in the subject and the potential the Northeast has for Ayush. Bhupender Yadav is the new minister for environment, forest and climate change with additional charge of the labour and employment ministry. There seems no connection between the two, except that both ministries have plenty of regulatory laws and Yadav is a lawyer.

Modi's third major imperative was to give his government a pro-poor and inclusive image. So, in addition to the new cabinet ministers, 26 other fresh faces were made ministers of state. The new inductions have a decided tilt towards the other backward classes and the scheduled castes and tribes. In all, Modi's cabinet now has 27 OBCs, 12 SCs and 8 STs, who account for 60 per cent of the total 78 ministers. Political compulsions have also been heeded to boost the party's chances in the six states going to the elections in 2022: Uttar Pradesh, Manipur, Goa, Punjab, Uttarakhand and Gujarat. For instance, three of the seven new Union ministers from UP are from the OBC category, meant to assuage the leaders who have been complaining about being sidelined. The SCs

DROPPED MINISTERS

RAVI SHANKAR PRASAD, *Telecom, MeitY, Law & Justice*

Reason: The PM wanted fresh talent for MeitY and telecom, party wanted a heavyweight for organisational work

Future: May be assigned a party role

PRAKASH JAVADEKAR, *Environment, Forest & Climate Change; Heavy Industries; Information & Broadcasting*

Reason: Required for organisational work, may get other responsibilities

Future: May get role in party

THAWARCHAND GEHLOT, *Social Justice & Empowerment*

Reason: Nearing unofficial retirement age of 75

Future: Appointed Karnataka governor

SANTOSH GANGWAR, *Labour & Employment*

Reason: Nearing unofficial retirement age of 75. Party wasn't happy with his handling of the labour migration crisis during the 2020 lockdown

Future: Unclear

HARSH VARDHAN, *Health*

Reason: Poor handling of the Covid second wave, including treatment and availability of healthcare facilities, medicines and vital equipment

Future: May be asked to mentor BJP's Delhi unit for forthcoming corporation polls

RAMESH POKHRIYAL, *Education*

Reason: Slow in getting New Education Policy implemented. His ill health is also cited

Future: May return to state politics

D.V. SADANANDA GOWDA, *Chemicals & Fertilisers*

Reason: Lacklustre performance, achievements few

Future: May return to Karnataka politics

NEWBIES

NARAYAN RANE, *MSME*

Reason: Former Maharashtra CM and Konkan leader. His entry may rule out any BJP-Shiv Sena deal in the state

ASHWINI VAISHNAW, *Railways; Communication; Electronics & IT*

Reason: PM Modi's backroom boy. A former bureaucrat with RSS background. Was personal secretary to former PM Vajpayee

SARBANANDA SONOWAL, *Ports, Shipping & Waterways*

Reason: Former Assam CM who accepted the party's decision to hand over the reins to Himanta Biswa Sarma in the state

JYOTIRADITYA SCINDIA, *Civil Aviation*

Reason: Defected from the Congress in 2020 along with loyalists. His entry into BJP shook the Rahul Gandhi camp

BHUPENDER YADAV, *Environment, Forest & Climate Change; Labour & Employment*

Reason: Amit Shah confidant, was a contender for the BJP chief's post along with J.P. Nadda. Organisation man, worked in RSS affiliates

PASHUPATI KUMAR PARAS: *Food Processing Industries*

Reason: Staged a coup against nephew Chirag Paswan to take control of the LJP. The BJP's ally in Bihar has a 4 per cent vote share, especially among Dalits

VIRENDRA KUMAR, *Social Justice*

Reason: BJP's Dalit face and seniormost parliamentarian. He is expected to fill the space left by Thawarchand Gehlot's exit from active politics

RAMCHANDRA PRASAD SINGH, *Steel*

Reason: JD(U) boss Nitish Kumar's confidant. The party refused to join the Modi cabinet in the past, but lost bargaining power after the 2020 assembly poll

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have received widespread representation, including Shantanu Thakur from West Bengal, A. Narayanaswamy from Karnataka, L. Murugan from Tamil Nadu, and Sunita Duggal from Haryana. With Gujarat going to the polls in December 2022, Rupala and Mandaviya have been elevated to cabinet rank while Darshana Jardosh, Devusinh Chauhan and Dr Mahendrabhai Munjpara have become ministers of state.

The fourth objective of Modi's mega cabinet makeover was to ensure the BJP's allies in the NDA government were rewarded for their support while sending a strong message to its rivals. Former Shiv Sena chief minister Narayan Rane, who had defected to the BJP, therefore, was given charge of the MSME (micro, small and medium enterprises) ministry. The move is meant to signal to the Sena that the BJP will not be joining hands with it to form a government in Maharashtra in the near future. The BJP has also ensured its other allies in Bihar have been given berths. Ramchandra Prasad Singh, the national president of the Janata Dal (United), is the new steel minister. Pashupati Paras of the Lok Janshakti Party, who ousted nephew Chirag Paswan as party president, is now the food processing industries minister. Anupriya Patel of Apna Dal, another ally, is the MoS for commerce and industry. Modi has also addressed regional and state expectations. The northeastern states, for instance, now have two cabinet ministers and three junior ministers, the highest representation they have had in recent years.

The fifth and final aim of Modi's cabinet revamp is to build a second generation of leaders who are in their 50s and early 60s to take over in the future. Forty-four of the 78 ministers in the cabinet now are below 60. Karnataka's Sushri Shobha Karandlaje, 54, an acolyte of state chief minister B.S. Yeddyurappa, is one such leader. Jyotiraditya Scindia, 50, is being built as a successor to Shivraj Singh Chouhan in Madhya Pradesh. The promotion of Mandaviya, 49, and the important portfolios he has been given, make him a contender for future leadership in Gujarat. Anurag Thakur, 46, is seen as a potential chief minister in Himachal Pradesh. The elevation of G. Kishan Reddy, 57, an influential Reddy leader from Telangana, to cabinet rank has been done with an eye to gaining a strong foothold for the 2023 assembly election. Efforts have also been made to bring in more educated ministers. Over 95 per cent of the new inductees are graduates, with four of them having doctorates, three MBA qualifications, and seven postgraduate degrees. Also included are four doctors and two former IAS officers.

Overall, the cabinet reset is intended to ensure speedy and transparent delivery of the government's development programmes, much faster economic recovery and expansion and more inclusive, balanced representation and growth. A much-needed cabinet reshuffle, it still has plenty of scope for improvement. Especially in further rationalising portfolio allocation. While all the ministers will no doubt function under Modi's shadow, it is important they are more visible and vocal about their work. Each one needs to be a champion of their ministry if Modi's mega makeover is to achieve its objectives. ■

↑ **HALLOWED PORTAL** The PM with the 43 newly sworn-in ministers and others at Rashtrapati Bhavan, July 7

INDIA
TODAY

TOKYO 2020

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GUTS AND GLORY

DELAYED AND NEARLY DERAILED BY COVID, THE TOKYO GAMES ARE FINALLY ON. A LOOK AT INDIA'S PREPARATIONS AND MEDAL PROSPECTS

***BY* SUHANI SINGH**

Illustration by NILANJAN DAS

ONCE EVERY FOUR YEARS, 1.3 billion Indians take their eyes off cricket and invest their faith in athletes who go about their sporting business in quiet glory. There is a fond hope that they'll bring home a medal. As boxer Pooja Rani says, "Everyone is like '*Abhi bas Olympic mein medal le aa* (Just get a medal in the Olympics)'. Like medals are just being handed around. Few know the hard work it entails." Just to qualify for the Olympics, an athlete has distances to clear, timings to go under and rankings to attain. For that, one needs to compete in events. Most of them were cancelled in 2020 due to Covid-19. Mercifully, 16 months of uncertainty have yielded an unexpected result. India heads to Tokyo with its biggest-ever contingent—120 athletes—across 18 disciplines, from archery and fencing to swimming and equestrian. On them rides India's hopes for glory at the world's greatest sporting event.

TOKYO 2020

For a while, though, it seemed the fate of the event would be hostage to the vagaries of a tiny virus. The Olympics have seen their share of disasters, including two world wars, which has led to their cancellation thrice—in 1916, 1940 and 1944. As country after country went into lockdown, the International Olympic Committee and the Japanese government postponed the Games by a year. Sportspersons, anyway, had little access to training facilities. With their fitness levels compromised and no match practice, not many were equipped to compete at the highest level. Swimmer Sajan Prakash, for one, was glad the Games was postponed. Having recovered from a neck injury in March 2020, he could not get into a pool in Thailand until June. A year later, he swam his personal best in the 200m butterfly to qualify for his second consecutive Olympics.

Those in 'duel sports' such as wrestling and boxing struggled to find sparring partners. Rani put on five kilos during the lockdown and returned to the ring in September feeling like she was starting from scratch. Fencer C.A. Bhavani Devi turned her kit bag into a dummy partner to practise on her terrace in Chennai. In January 2021, two months after she headed back to her training base in Italy, she learned that her mother, Ramani, was in the ICU battling Covid. "It was very difficult for me to stay in Italy while she was in hospital," says Devi. "I was relieved only after I spoke to my siblings. Finally, it was my mom who said, 'I will take care of myself, you just focus on your training'."

Covid played on the minds of many athletes. Javelin thrower Neeraj Chopra, one of India's top medal contenders, wrote on athletics portal spikes.com in June 2021 how the Covid situation in the country affected him. 'I try not to let the situation bother me,' he wrote, 'but it happens around me, so that's not entirely possible.' Others contracted the virus themselves, among them pistol shooters Rahi Sarnobat and Saurabh Chaudhary; women hockey players, including captain Rani Rampal Singh, and a few coaches and staff from the women's boxing team. "I thought I'd test positive too," says boxer Rani, who went into precautionary quarantine for two weeks in April. "I wondered how we would compete in the [Asian Boxing] Championships."

Sacrifice is part of sporting excellence but Covid meant being away from family in an hour of crisis. P.V. Sindhu told INDIA TODAY how her South Korean coach Park Tae-sang saw his family only for two weeks in 2020 so that he could practise with her. Rider Fouaad Mirza trained and tended horses in Germany's sparsely populated hamlet of Bergedorf, even as he worried about his parents in Bengaluru.

The challenges have been manifold and they continue to be so with just weeks to go for the Games. India is one of the few countries to face strict regulations pertaining to entry

INDIA AT TOKYO 2020

120 Indian athletes **ACROSS 18 DISCIPLINES,** ranging from archery and athletics to swimming and rowing

15 members in **INDIA'S SHOOTING** squad, the biggest so far

9 **BOXERS**, the highest ever Indian representation in this discipline

6 **WORLD #1 ATHLETES.** Vinesh Phogat (wrestling), Deepika Kumari (archery), Amit Panghal (52 kg boxing), Yashaswini Singh Deswal and Abhishek Verma (10m air pistol), and Elavenil Valarivan (10m air rifle)

2 athletes will compete in **THREE EVENTS**–Atanu Das (archery) in individual, men's team and mixed team events; Manu Bhaker (10m and 25m pistol and mixed team events)

45 **THE OLDEST** sportsperson in the squad–skeet shooter Mairaj Khan

18 **THE YOUNGEST INDIAN OLYMPIAN** in Tokyo–Divyansh Singh Panwar, ranked world #2 in 10m air rifle

3 No. of **FOUR-TIME OLYMPIANS**–Sharath Kamal, Seema Punia and Sania Mirza. Leander Paes holds the record with seven, but will not be part of the squad in Tokyo. Athletes, as well as coaches and support staff, from India will have to be tested twice—96 and 72 hours before departure for Tokyo—after which they cannot come into contact or train with athletes from other countries for three days. Among the affected will be players from the men's and women's hockey teams, those from the 26-member strong athletics contingent, as well as paddlers, archers and others.

The restrictions and the constant threat of Covid-19 are reasons why some of India's biggest medal contenders shifted their Olympic preparations abroad—it also helped them get a few international competitions under their belts. Chopra (in Europe), wrestlers Bajrang Punia (Russia) and Vinesh Phogat (Hungary), and weightlifter Mirabai Chanu (the US) will reach Tokyo from their respective bases. India's highly regarded shooting contingent will leave from Croatia where they have been training since mid-May. Recently, the Boxing Federation of India and the ministries of youth affairs & sports and external affairs facilitated the travel of nine boxers from Italy where they have been since June 19 for a training camp. Funds too have been released swiftly, be it from MYAS's Target Olympic Podium Scheme (TOPS) to elite athletes or the Annual Calendar for Training and Competition (ACTC) to 18 national sports federations. A cumulative Rs 1,169.65 crore has been disbursed since 2016.

THIS IS THE FIRST TIME INDIA WILL FIELD A REPRESENTATIVE IN FENCING. IT'S ALSO THE FIRST TIME AT THE OLYMPICS THAT INDIA IS SENDING A FEMALE SAILOR (NETHRA KUMANAN) AND A FEMALE SWIMMER (MAANA PATEL)

Yet, India's Olympic medal tally is a grim reminder to tone down expectations. India has won 28 medals from 24 Games. The paltry returns from Rio 2016—a silver (Sindhu) and a bronze (Sakshi Malik)—highlighted how, for all the excitement around them, sports need investment at the grassroots level.

Kiren Rijiju, till recently the minister of state for youth affairs and sports, stated it baldly at a media interaction in June. "India has not been counted as a major country in the Olympics," he said, as he recalled India's former glory in men's hockey. "Today, there's not one sporting discipline where India is really dominant. Our medals have been [a] handful." Against this harsh reality, he hoped India would "do better [in Tokyo] than at any other time in the past".

That past is not too distant and also not one with a lofty or unattainable target. India's best showing so far was at the 2012 London Games when it returned with six medals, even if there was no gold. Six is also the number of Indian athletes currently at the top of their respective disciplines heading into the Olympics. Others are ranked #2—Chanu, Punia, shooters Rahi Sarnobat, Saurabh Chaudhary, Divyansh Singh Panwar and Aishwary Pratap Tomar—buoying hope that Tokyo 2020 could be where and when India's Olympics fortunes turn.

But the Games are not just about winning or losing. It's the stories of resilience and perseverance against all odds that really make them memorable. This is the first time India will field a representative in fencing. It's also the first time that a female sailor (Nethra Kumanan) and a female swimmer (Maana Patel) from the country will compete. It takes years of effort to reach the stage where one can compete against the world's best, let alone beat them to that ultimate sporting accomplishment—an Olympic medal. P.V. Sindhu has one—a silver—and she, like many athletes, has put in the sweat and the tears only to falter at the final frontier. "Making it to the finals, too, is not easy," she says. "When you reach that stage, you will always give your best. But sometimes, it just may not be your day." They may not all return with a medal, but then making it to the Olympics is in itself a milestone. ■

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SUPER SHUTTLER

P.V. SINDHU, 26

DISCIPLINE: BADMINTON

QUALIFYING RUN: Her consistent performances in 2019 ensured she finished in the top 16 in the world

ACHIEVEMENTS : After her silver medal in Rio, Sindhu has won the BWF Super Series Finals in 2018 and is the reigning World Badminton Champion, having won the title in 2019

Photograph by BANDEEP SINGH

Five years ago, P.V. Sindhu's silver medal at the Rio Games was the saving grace of India's otherwise dismal campaign. Back then, the shuttler was the underdog; this time around, she is the reigning World Champion.

For Operation Rio, Sindhu switched off her phone for months; Mission Tokyo is "completely the opposite", she says with a laugh. She has her phone by her side, but not coach Pullela Gopichand. That role is now played by South Korea's former shuttler, Park Tae-sang. "Change is not compulsory but it is good," she says about the switch. "Every coach offers a new mindset and game style." In the many interviews she has given in the run-up to the Olympics, she appears at ease and sure of her abilities. Winning does that to an athlete. "I am more confident," she tells INDIA TODAY. But will it be enough for her to become only the second Indian athlete, after the now infamous wrestler Sushil Kumar, to win back-to-back Olympic medals?

If you've seen her training at the Gachibowli Stadium in Hyderabad, you'd have your hopes up. That's where Sindhu has been based since February, its size allowing her to grow comfortable with the drift and shuttle speed in a large indoor stadium, which will be a critical factor in the mammoth fortress of Tokyo's Musashino Forest Sport Plaza. Her days at Gachibowli begin at 7 am. There are days when Tae-sang takes the court himself, sending shuttles to all corners of the court at varying speeds for her to retrieve; on others, male players from the nearby Suchitra Badminton Academy line up to hit their hardest smashes against the world #7. (Sindhu's last title came at the World Championships in August 2019, after which her ranking has slipped from five to seven.) Tae-sang varies her opponents, sometimes making her play against two players at one go. "It is good to play against players with different strokes," says Sindhu of her intense regimen which includes weight training and running. "If you want to improve, you have to play against high standard players."

Competition, though, has been a major issue for shuttlers during the pandemic. April and May saw tournaments cancelled, leaving Kidambi Srikanth and Saina Nehwal unable to compete and earn the points necessary to qualify for Tokyo. Sindhu is one of just four Indian shuttlers to have made the cut—the others are Sai Praneeth (men's) and Chirag Shetty and Satwiksairaj Rankireddy (men's doubles). But India's hopes will be pinned on its most famous sportswoman. "There is more pressure now compared to 2016," she says. "Now it's like 'wherever Sindhu goes, we need a medal'. It is not going to be easy."

CoachSpeak

"SINDHU'S BIGGEST ADVANTAGE IS HER STRONG ATTACK. AS FAR AS I KNOW, IT MAKES HER THE BEST ATTACKING PLAYER ALONG WITH CAROLINA MARIN. WHAT IS DIFFERENT THIS TIME IS THAT SINDHU HAS ALSO ACQUIRED MOTION SKILLS TO DECEIVE HER OPPONENTS"

– Park Tae-sang
P.V. Sindhu's coach

The field is missing one of her biggest rivals and Rio champion, Spain's Carolina Marin, but is still daunting. There's world #1 Tai Tzu-ying and Thailand's Ratchanok Intanon, whose nifty shot-making is wondrous to behold; Japan's Nozomi Okuhara and Akane Yamaguchi who are indefatigable, and the Chinese players, Chen Yu Fei and He Bing Jiao, who know how to rise to the occasion. Sindhu's toughest competitor has been Tzu-ying, who has a 13:5 edge over her. For Sindhu, the previous matches won't be a decisive factor given that a long tour break has allowed players to "add new skills and technique". Also, it's the Olympics—a stage that can rattle the nerves of even the best.

Sindhu is all too familiar with the feeling. She has lived with the reputation of having what she describes as "finals phobia". Questions have been raised about her ability to deliver when it matters most. She says she doesn't let the detractors get to her. "Dealing with losses is tough," she says. "In the back of my mind, I did think 'What is happening?' But when I'm in the finals, I don't carry the baggage of earlier losses." Winning the BWF World Tour Finals in 2018 was a turning point. The next year, she followed it up with the World Championship title, her first gold and her fifth World Championship medal.

In Tokyo, Sindhu's coach and her physiotherapist Evangeline Baddam will be by her side. "She is improving every day," says Tae-sang. "We are trying to improve her confidence too." Another loud supporter—and the most excited when she returns home after a hard day's work—is Rio, her eight-month-old Labrador. It's a running joke within her circle that if she wins in Tokyo, she should get another pet. "My mother says one is enough," laughs Sindhu. But could anyone deny a two-time Olympic medalist her wish? ■

—Suhani Singh

GOLDEN EYE

ELAVENIL VALARIVAN, 21

DISCIPLINE: SHOOTING

CATEGORY: 10m air rifle individual and mixed team events

QUALIFYING RUN: Her No. 1 world rank and consistent performances made the National Rifle Association of India give her the Olympic quota spot in April 2021

ACHIEVEMENTS: Gold medals at the 2019 ISSF World Cups in Putian and Rio de Janeiro

Unlike most shooters who have represented India, the sport is not a legacy for Elavenil Valarivan. Born in Cuddalore, Tamil Nadu, Elavenil, or Ela as she is called by those who know her well, took up shooting when she was around 12. Her parents were academics and Valarivan remembers being "introduced to shooting by the daughter of my father's student, who was into the sport". That first mentor "gave me the initial training and even loaned me an air rifle. I did not know any other discipline. I got a hang of it and there was no looking back," says Valarivan, who is also pursuing a Bachelors degree in Arts and Literature from Gujarat University.

Valarivan's rise in shooting has been gradual but steady. She won her first gold medal at the age of 13, later winning a gold at the nationals. In 2018, she came under the mentorship of Olympic bronze medallist Gagan Narang and won gold medals at the ISSF Junior World Cups at Suhl and Sydney. But it was in 2019 that she stormed into the senior shooting scene, winning the gold at the Putian and Rio de Janeiro ISSF World Cups. Had the Tokyo Games been held on schedule in 2020, Valarivan would have been buoyed by the momentum. However, the Covid-19 pandemic halted her dominance. At the recent ISSF World Cups held in New Delhi and Osijek in Croatia, she failed to make it to the finals. She will be keen to put these blips behind her.

Valarivan joins a contingent of 15 shooters—India's biggest ever—in Tokyo. Expectations are sky high, which explains why she tweeted in early June that she was "going offline" to have '#NoDistractions' and focus on the '#OlympicDream'. She has been in Croatia since May, preparing with teammates. Among them is 18-year-old Divyansh Singh Panwar with whom Valarivan will participate in the 10m air rifle mixed team event that makes its Olympic debut in Tokyo. The duo won a gold medal at the ISSF World Cup in New Delhi.

Training abroad, Valarivan says, has been similar to what it was like back home—four hours of practising at the range besides working out and mental fitness exercises. How does she keep herself motivated, especially with Covid casting a shadow on the Games? "I am not limiting myself to this particular Olympics. I train keeping the long-term picture in mind," she says.

Given Valarivan's age and the Paris Games being only three years away, time is on her side. Her passion for shooting also remains high. "Shooting has made me a calmer person. It's an addictive sport even though it may not look so to spectators. It's a twisted game with complexities, which makes you want to go back to the grind again and again," she says. ■

—Rahul Noronha

CoachSpeak

"ON THE BASIS OF PAST PERFORMANCES, VALARIVAN HAS APPEARED TO BE VERY STRONG IN THE FINALS AS WELL AS MIXED TEAM EVENTS. SHE DOES NOT GET OVERWHELMED DURING MATCHES AND BRINGS A VERY POSITIVE VIBE TO THE RANGE"

Mansher Singh
Four-time Olympic trap shooter, Commonwealth Games gold medalist, national coach for shotgun shooting

ISSEI KATO/ REUTERS

SPEARING AHEAD

NEERAJ CHOPRA, 23

DISCIPLINE: JAVELIN THROW

QUALIFYING RUN: In January 2020, at his first competition after an elbow injury kept him out of action the previous year, Chopra's throw of 87.86m guaranteed a ticket to Tokyo

ACHIEVEMENTS: World no. 4. Chopra is the Asian Games and Commonwealth Games gold medallist and the national record holder with a throw of 88.07m in Patiala in March 2021

Athletics has long been a chink in India's Olympic armour. Comprising a wide range of track and field events, India hasn't had a serious contender for decades. That changes with javelin thrower Neeraj Chopra, who makes his Olympic debut in Tokyo. There's good reason why India believes the floppy-haired youngster can finally open its tally in athletics. Chopra has been a junior world champion and record holder; an Asian Games gold medallist who recently hit the 88.07m mark, so far the fourth highest in the world in 2021 and his career best. "I am not going [to Tokyo] with any specific target except to throw my best," says Chopra. "That is what is in my control and what I will be focusing on. I don't think it makes sense to put myself under any pressure over things I cannot control."

What Chopra could control was his training schedule, but the Covid-19 pandemic, specifically India's second wave, hurt those preparations. During a press interaction arranged by the Sports Authority of India (SAI) in May, Chopra was vocal about how training in hot weather conditions in India was neither enough nor ideal. "When competitions restarted around the world and we were still unable to train and compete here in India, it was especially difficult to keep the motivation levels up," Chopra told INDIA TODAY. "It is important that I am able to perform in different conditions, against top level opposition, in order to be fully prepared for Tokyo."

In June, Chopra was finally able to leave for Europe to assess his form against rivals, including Germany's Johannes Vetter and Trinidad and Tobago's Keshorn Walcott, who have registered the first and second biggest throws this year. An event in Lisbon would be Chopra's first international event since the one in January 2020 in South Africa. "That feeling of competing is something I had missed for the past year, so I am happy I was able to manage this international leg," he said. Chopra's sponsors, JSW Sports and SAI, along with the external affairs ministry, stepped up efforts to facilitate his travel and training.

Chopra's athletics journey began with running, which his parents felt could help their pudgy 11-year-old kid lose some weight and gain confidence. Dispatched to the Shivaji Stadium in Panipat, Haryana, Chopra would gradually lean towards javelin, and his prowess soon won the attention of coaches. He made quick progress. At the National Junior Athletics Championships in 2012, the 15-year-old set a record with a gold medal-winning throw of 68.46m. Four years later, the boy from Khandra in Panipat came under the international spotlight by setting a junior world record with an 86.48m throw at the IAAF World U20 Championships and becoming India's first junior world champion in any athletic discipline. The feat sadly came a week too late for qualification for the Rio Games 2016. In Rio, that throw would have won him a bronze.

Tokyo, Chopra admits, is a tougher field even though defending Olympic champion Thomas Roehler (of Germany) and 2019 World silver medallist Magnus Kirt (Estonia) are missing in action. "At the world level, I would need to perform even better as the current global standard is quite high. There has never been such a tough competition in the history of the sport," Chopra said in May. The biggest throw this year has been 96.29m. Chopra has yet to breach the 89m mark.

After losing 2019 to injury and 2020 to the pandemic, Chopra is now raring to go. Every second counts now. He trains Monday to Saturday, with mornings devoted to weight training, while gymnastics, jumps and throwing sessions are spread through the week. He's working on his technique with a new Valhalla javelin from Nordic Sport with which he struck his career-best in March. "It was probably not even my best throw," he says. "There is scope to improve." India needs him to hit his peak in the first week of August at the Games. If that happens, he could well make history. ■

—Suhani Singh

CoachSpeak

"IN INTERNATIONAL MEETS BEFORE THE OLYMPICS, HE HAS COMPETED AGAINST LEADING ATHLETES AND FINISHED THIRD IN ONE. IT DEMONSTRATES THAT HE IS ONE OF THE SIX TO EIGHT WHO WILL BE STRONG MEDAL CONTENDERS. ULTIMATELY, THE ONE WHO BRINGS TOGETHER ALL HIS STRENGTH, MOTIVATION, EXPERIENCE, AGGRESSIVENESS, SPEED AND EXPLOSIVENESS ON THAT GIVEN DAY WILL PREVAIL"

– Dr Klaus Bartonietz
German biomechanics expert and javelin coach overseeing Chopra's progress over the past two years

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POWER PACKED

BAJRANG PUNIA, 27

DISCIPLINE: WRESTLING (65KG)

QUALIFYING RUN: Won a bronze medal at the 2019 World Wrestling Championships in Nur-Sultan, Kazakhstan

ACHIEVEMENTS: Ranked #2, Punia is the only Indian wrestler to have won three World Championship medals. He has at least one gold medal in each of four big international tournaments: the Asian Games, the Asian Championships, the Commonwealth Games and the Commonwealth Championships, making him one of India's most successful wrestlers

BAJRANG PUNIA has a trophy cabinet laden with medals from every competition he has participated in, starting with the 2013 World Wrestling Championships, where he first shot to fame with a bronze. Given his achievements across a career that is closing in on a decade, it comes as a surprise that Tokyo 2020 will be Punia's maiden appearance at the Olympics.

When Punia is on the mat, there is never a dull moment. His power and stamina have won him the nickname 'The Tank' in wrestling circles—he is relentless on the attack and can find scoring opportunities for the entire duration of a six-minute bout. However, his all-out attacking style has also cost him at times, and Punia has had to work on his defence to deflect his rivals' attacks, particularly those aimed at his legs.

Over the past three years, Punia has been one of the busiest wrestlers around, having fought more than 75 bouts (and won more than 65 of them). His weight category is loaded with Olympic and World Champions, many of whom have migrated from either the 61kg or 66kg categories, a fact that Punia is well aware of.

"Why this is considered the most difficult weight category can be gauged from the fact that no wrestler has ever been able to defend his title, neither at the Olympics nor at World Championships. There are no favourites here," he says.

Reigning world champion Gadzhimurad Rashidov (against whom Punia has never competed), 2018 world champion Takuto Otoguro of Japan, Kazakhstan's Daulet Niyazbekov (who got the better of Punia in the last World Championships they competed in before Punia settled the score recently), and Rio Olympics bronze medalist Haji Aliyev from Azerbaijan are some of the prominent names that will feature in the fiercely contested men's 65kg category.

However, what separates Punia from the rest is his big-match pedigree and the consistency he has demonstrated of late. One telling stat that gives Indians hope is that since 2018, Punia has won medals at every major competition he has participated in. At the Olympics, Punia will be as major a contender as any of the other formidable names in the line-up.

Punia's personal coach Emzarios 'Shako' Bentinidis, who has been with him since February 2018, has played a huge role in the wrestler's recent successes, and the two share a close bond. Not too long ago, Punia's game was all about strength and power, but Shako has made some important changes to his technique and the results are there for all to see.

Currently, Punia is training in Vladikavkaz, Russia, where some of the best grapplers of the world hone their skills. "This is the best place to train with good sparring partners. Soslan Romanov (the 2016 Olympic champion in 65kg)

RAJWANT RAWAT

trains here, Zaurbek Sidakov (World champion, 74kg), David Baev (World champion, 70kg) and other top wrestlers are here," says Punia. The move to Russia before the biggest competition of his life was a much-needed shift for Punia, whose preparations were disrupted by the Covid-19 pandemic. For eight months, he couldn't travel abroad because of the restrictions and, within the country, he couldn't find a sparring partner in his weight category. "For the entire duration of this pandemic, my sparring partner was Jitender, who competes in 74kg," says Punia. "The techniques that I would use against him may or may not work against someone from my weight category. Also, you can't discount the risk of an injury."

Punia took to wrestling like a fish to water because the sport was in his blood, his father being a wrestler himself. He started grappling at the age of seven and just days before he was to turn 14, he walked into the Chhatrasal Stadium in Delhi's Model Town in 2008, the same year that Sushil Kumar won India's second medal in wrestling at the Olympics. But Punia never wanted to be a Sushil Kumar because he was devoted to Yogeshwar Dutt and in 2015, both of them moved out of Chhatrasal Stadium to begin their training at Sonepat's Sports Authority of India centre. Like his idol did in 2012, Punia would like to win an Olympic medal. It's the only one missing from an illustrious career. ■

—Rahul Rawat

MentorSpeak

"THE AMOUNT OF POWER AND STAMINA BAJRANG POSSESSES—I DOUBT THERE IS ANY OTHER FREESTYLE WRESTLER WHO CAN MATCH UP TO HIM IN THAT REGARD. HE HAS THE ABILITY TO COMPETE WITH THE SAME INTENSITY FROM START TO END, WHICH IS VERY RARE IN A SPORT LIKE WRESTLING"

—Yogeshwar Dutt
Bronze medalist, 2012 London Games

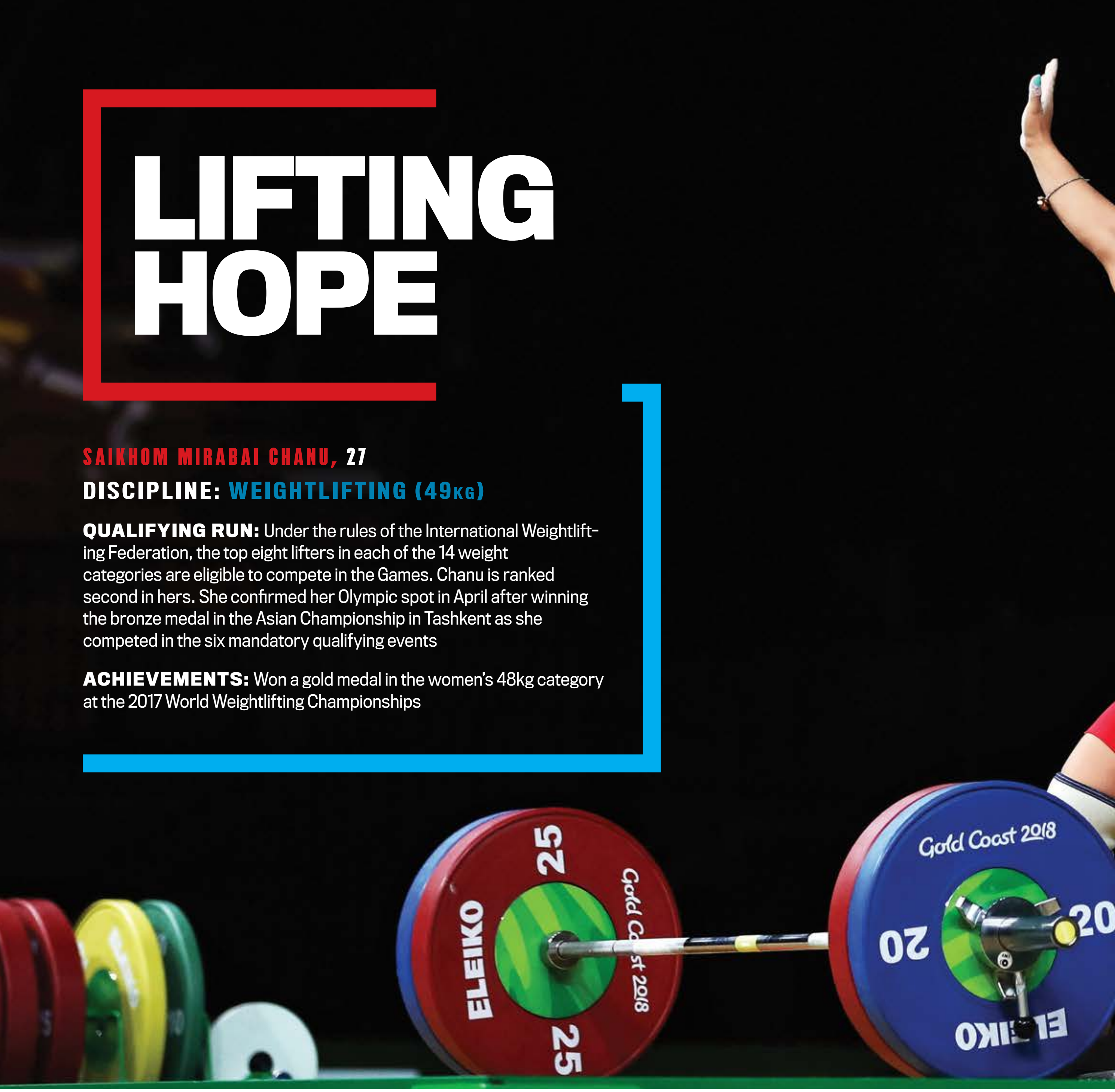
LIFTING HOPE

SAIKHOM MIRABAI CHANU, 27

DISCIPLINE: WEIGHTLIFTING (49KG)

QUALIFYING RUN: Under the rules of the International Weightlifting Federation, the top eight lifters in each of the 14 weight categories are eligible to compete in the Games. Chanu is ranked second in hers. She confirmed her Olympic spot in April after winning the bronze medal in the Asian Championship in Tashkent as she competed in the six mandatory qualifying events

ACHIEVEMENTS: Won a gold medal in the women's 48kg category at the 2017 World Weightlifting Championships



On April 17, India's star weightlifter Saikhom Mirabai Chanu was on the verge of a most unpleasant moment of déjà vu. At the Asian Championship in Tashkent, the diminutive lifter from Manipur failed to nail a lift in the first two of her three attempts in the snatch. A third 'no-lift' would have ended Chanu's medal hopes, a repeat of the horror show five years ago, at the Rio Olympics, where she crashed out after failing to lift the weight in any of her three attempts in the clean and jerk category.

But Chanu is not someone who repeats mistakes. In her final attempt, she lifted 86kg and then went on to create a world record by lifting an incredible 119kg in the clean and jerk. The combined total of 205kg earned her a bronze medal and a ticket to Tokyo. Now, Chanu aims to do even better. "After breaking the world record in Tashkent, I felt that I could do better for India at the Olympics. I don't know what will happen on the day of the competition, but like any other athlete, I want to win the gold medal," Chanu tells INDIA TODAY.

Dramatic turnarounds have been part of Chanu's career right from the start. Born in Nongpok Kakching, a village 45 km south of Manipur's capital Imphal, she initially wanted to be an archer. Then, in her class VIII text book, she read

DEAN MOUHTAROPOULOS/GETTY IMAGES

a chapter on Kunjarani Devi, another iconic weightlifter from Manipur. That was when Chanu, the youngest of six siblings, set her heart on weightlifting. She got instant support from her mother, who had noticed that Chanu could lift more than her brothers.

She did not let her mother down. In 2014, she shot to national fame by winning a silver medal at the Commonwealth Games in Glasgow. Three years later, Chanu became world champion in the women's 48kg category at the World Weightlifting Championships, the first time in two decades that an Indian woman weightlifter had won a gold at the World Championships. This was followed by another gold at the 2018 Commonwealth Games. In 2019, she finished fourth at the Asian Weightlifting Championships, but bettered her own national record set at the 2019 World Weightlifting Championships with a combined total of 201kg—crossing the 200kg barrier for the first time.

Meanwhile, she had been nursing a lower back problem since 2018—it became so acute in 2020 that she could not even lift half the load she normally could. Along with the back pain, the pandemic struck, a lockdown was announced, and her training stopped. "I could not train during the lockdown. And without training, muscle loss happens very fast. Besides, the confinement to one room at the training centre in Patiala took a toll on my mind too," she says. In October 2020, Chanu's coach Vijay Sharma took her to St Louis in the US to train under former weightlifter and renowned coach Aaron Horschig. For this, the Sports Authority of India's Mission Olympic Cell sanctioned nearly Rs 71 lakh under an initiative to support medal prospects.

MentorSpeak

"I'M 100 PER CENT CONFIDENT THAT CHANU WILL WIN INDIA A MEDAL IN TOKYO. PERHAPS SHE WILL GET THE GOLD. SHE IS A VERY HARDWORKING AND DISCIPLINED ATHLETE. RECENTLY, SHE UPPED HER GAME TO A DIFFERENT LEVEL. IT'S TIME FOR HER TO TASTE OLYMPIC GLORY"

– Karnam Malleswari
Weightlifting bronze medalist, Sydney Olympics, 2000

The results started showing soon. From not being able to practise two days in a row, she started doing two sessions a day on Mondays, Wednesdays and Fridays. On Tuesdays, Thursdays and Saturdays, she trained once a day. She also worked on her snatch technique, an area of concern for the Khel Ratna Award winner. In the Asian Championship in April, her first competition in more than 16 months, her 86kg lift in the snatch paled in comparison to the top two medalists, Hou Zhihui and Huihua—both from China—who lifted 96kg and 89-kg respectively. But in the clean and jerk, Chanu erased the world record previously held by Zhihui by lifting a kilogram more. In Tokyo, Chanu will only have to contend with world #1 Zhihui—under Olympic rules, a country can send only one lifter per category.

Further boosting Chanu's chances is North Korea's withdrawal from the Olympics—Ri-Song Gum, only the fourth weightlifter to have lifted more than 200kg in Tashkent, will not be in the way of Chanu's contest with Zhihui. Thailand and Malaysia have also been banned because of multiple doping offences. While Chanu says she is not particularly bothered about her rivals, she does not want to get bogged down by the billion-plus hopes riding on her. "I'm not thinking much about the outcome. There is pressure, but I'm focusing more on the training," she says. We wish her luck. ■

—Kaushik Deka

SHE AIMS TO WIN

REUTERS

MANU BHAKER, 19

DISCIPLINE: AIR PISTOL SHOOTING

CATEGORY: 10m and 25m individual; 10m mixed team events

QUALIFYING RUN: Clinched an Olympic berth in the 10m pistol event by finishing fourth in the International Shooting Sport Federation World Cup final in Munich in May 2019. The National Rifle Association of India picked her for the 25m pistol event for consistent performance

ACHIEVEMENTS: World #2 in 10m women's pistol. Won 10m individual and mixed team events at ISSF World Cup final in China in 2019. Won gold at the Youth Olympics, Commonwealth Games in 10m in 2018

Until age 14, boxing, karate, football, tennis and skating held Manu Bhaker's interest. Shooting, says the teenager from Goria village in Haryana, was one of the activities she "randomly tried" and ended up liking. "I love competitions," says Bhaker, who is currently studying for an honours degree in political science at the Lady Shri Ram College in Delhi. "Now, I am in so many competitions that I am not getting time to try other sports." Her father, Ramkishen, though, says his daughter has taken to archery lately.

In her first Olympics, the 19-year-old will fulfil her hunger for competitions for she is fielded in three events. Is there added pressure? "I don't think so much. I love this sport and like the events, so I shoot in all of them. I shoot well, so I get selected," she says.

Bhaker exudes similar confidence at the range. Just two years into the sport, she won gold at an ISSF (International Shooting Sport Federation) World Cup in 2018, making her the youngest Indian shooter to do so. The same year, the then 16-year-old won two Commonwealth Games golds. But at the Asian Games a few months later, Bhaker couldn't deliver. The setback highlighted the need to protect India's teenage shooting sensations—four of whom are competing in the Olympics this year—from the burden of expectations.

Three years on, Bhaker is more experienced and composed. In Tokyo, Bhaker will be up against her compatriot Yashaswini Singh Deswal in 10m; Asian Games gold medallist Rahi Sarnobat in 25m, and partner with Saurabh Chaudhary, also 19, for the mixed team event. Given the duo's stupendous form at the ISSF World Cups—four golds in 2019, a gold and silver in 2021—they are fancied as India's best bet for a shooting medal.

If Bhaker does well, she could become a poster-girl for Indian shooting, one who is fitness-minded, fashionable and social media-savvy (she has over 41.6k followers on Instagram). For now, though, she's off social media and switches on her phone only for music. "Hopefully, I'll get back on social media with some good news," she says. A billion will be waiting. ■

—Suhani Singh

CoachSpeak

"YES, MANU GETS DEJECTED BY SETBACKS BUT SHE ALSO USES THEM TO BOUNCE BACK STRONGER. I AM ALSO ASTONISHED AT HER WILLINGNESS TO CHANGE. SHE IS QUITE OPEN TO EXPERIMENTING WITH THINGS SHE KNOWS WILL HELP HER IMPROVE HER GAME"

– Ronak Pandit
Former shooter and coach for pistol team

BRIDGESTONE INDIA'S OLYMPIC CAMPAIGN

Tyres are generally associated with Motorsports. So when Bridgestone stepped in as a global sponsor for all the Olympic Games from 2014 to 2024, it was path breaking. With the Tokyo Olympics just around the corner, **Mr. Deepak Gulati, Executive Officer Marketing & Business Solutions at Bridgestone India** spoke about their Olympic association.

Q Why is Bridgestone associating with the Olympics, globally?

"Chase Your Dream" is the global marketing campaign for Bridgestone's prestigious Olympic Games partnership. First unveiled a year prior to the 2016 games, it highlights the pursuit of performance that Bridgestone shares with the Olympic Movement and honours the commitment necessary to stay the course to realize one's dreams. The campaign "Chase Your Dream," aims to empower people of all abilities to persevere through adversity in pursuit of their dreams, and it resonates now more than ever. Bridgestone believes that sports have the incredible power to enthuse and inspire people to motivate and encourage them to chase their dreams.

This partnership helps Bridgestone to reiterate its commitment to community service, social responsibility and respect for diversity, core values that it shares with the Olympic movement.

Q Cricket reigns supreme in India. Athletes from other sports get noticed and mentioned only when medals are won. How does Bridgestone plan to get 125 billion Indians to cheer for the Indian Contingent?

At Bridgestone we believe a society that harbours a culture of sports and invests in its people contributes towards creation of better individuals -leading to a holistically developed nation. The perspective we resonate with the most is inducing a sense of national pride. Olympics is the world's biggest and most inclusive sporting platform and it's time for Indians to step forward and showcase more solidarity and love for the talent among athletes across the country.

The essence is that if hard work, passion and challenges of a sportsperson are no different across the sports, then why should the support be any different, be it cricket or any other sport. We should support and motivate our athletes to eventually help India become a holistic sporting nation. Restrained as we are because of social distancing and other health and safety norms, we have harnessed the digital power to reach out to Indians to come cheer for our athletes of 'Team Bridgestone'. The Indian contingent is world class, backed with perseverance, passion and initiative to make India proud and we feel honoured to encourage them in their incredible efforts and their journey leading to the Olympic Games Tokyo 2020.

With this thought, we are calling out a billion fans in our cricket-loving nation to come and support Indian athletes who are chasing their dreams and bringing laurels for the nation.

Q There is a big story of pure grit and determination behind every Indian Athlete representing the country in the Olympics. They have all risen above apathy and non-recognition to excel and stamp their marks, in a field that is not at all remunerative. How does Bridgestone identify with these heroes?

Our association with these sports personalities helps us connect with our target consumers in a very special way, cutting across the boundaries of specific sports and relating to the core spirit behind every sport. Sports personalities are known for their relentless determination to succeed. You have rightly said that there is a lot of toil and struggle and the 'chase your dream' stories of these athletes, who have exhibited tremendous endurance and performance to excel at the world stage, are still lesser known. Endurance and performance are key attributes of Bridgestone tyres as well and these are the very same virtues needed to Chase your Dream.

Q What are your expectations from the Indian Team and how does the company associate with the spirit of the Olympics.

We are keen to invest in improving the sports culture in India. Every member of the team infuses pride in Indians as they march behind the National Flag. It is after all a matter of personal pride for each of them to represent India in one of the biggest sporting events and compete with the best that the world has to offer. This is about the spirit of the game and the undying desire to chase your dreams. It is about acknowledging their endurance despite the struggles they have been through. We encourage all athletes because they are representing the country. Whatever be the result, its takes a lot to reach the most prestigious global platform of Olympics, and we are proud of our athletes who have made it there.

Bridgestone is extremely proud to be associated with the Olympics. When Bridgestone was formed in 1931, our founder was dedicated to "the welfare and happiness of all mankind," and this still carries through today in our company's mission to "Serve Society with Superior Quality". The games help showcase our company's commitment to community service, diversity and sustainability – all aspects of the Olympic movement align with Bridgestone's core values and our mission.

Q How is Bridgestone activating around the Olympic?

Bridgestone will help, support and enhance the Games time experience for everyone involved while also showcasing the value we create for the world. Bridgestone will maximize its position as one of the TOP Sponsors of the Olympic and Paralympic Games by providing its industry-leading products to official fleet vehicles at the Games. We have launched 'Chase Your Dream' campaign in India and have invested strongly in the digital medium to engage our audience and fans. It will be well supported by influencers and other mass mediums to get the desired reach for the noble message of our campaign.

And as a global leader in sustainable solutions beyond tires, Bridgestone is also contributing a variety of innovative products and solutions that are engineered to promote efficient and sustainable mobility, earthquake readiness, building efficiency and more. Many of these contributions are designed to positively benefit the city of Tokyo and its residents beyond the Games. For example, Bridgestone seismic isolation technology is featured in two new, high-profile venues the Tokyo Aquatics Centre and Ariake Arena. Additionally, Bridgestone helped install a specially designed curb stone in the Athletes' Village that will provide smooth, barrier-free access to bus transportation for people with limited mobility, especially those who are in wheelchairs. We would continue to invest in strengthening the core proposition of the brand, as well as strengthening equity by leveraging Olympics association. We will continue to innovate and bring more solutions that serve our customers better. Digital marketing will remain key in all our initiatives.

Q Are you planning any other engagements to influence your core audience with the Olympic message?

We personally think that sports strongly resonate with the category we are in. Sports signify the performance and endurance which is core to our products, tyres. Our target group also relates very well with sports, hence it is important for us to leverage this association and invest in it over time to engage the consumers and fans better. We have invested strongly in the digital medium to engage our audience and fans. It will be well supported by influencers and other mass mediums to get the massive outreach for the noble message of our campaign. We would further strengthen the same in the coming month with more media investments and digital innovations.

PUNCH PERFECT

SIMON SINGH

POOJA RANI, 30

DISCIPLINE: BOXING

CATEGORY: 75kg

QUALIFYING RUN: Defeated Thailand's Pornnipa Chutee in the continental qualifiers in March 2020

ACHIEVEMENTS: Gold at the ASBC Asian Boxing Championships in 2019 and 2021

Mary Kom's aura of grandeur still dominates Indian women's boxing but, at the 2021 Tokyo Games, hopes are high that the women's contingent will return with more than one medal. And Pooja Rani is a favourite among them. The Haryanvi has a gold from the ASBC Asian Boxing Championships in May and a victory over world champion Atheyna Bylon in March this year at the Boxam International Tournament where she won silver. There's also plenty of conviction, a positive mindset and preparation which includes sparring with men and watching bouts from the recent European qualifiers to assess her rivals' technique and game plan.

Having waited for a decade to make it to her maiden Olympics, Rani is keen to seize the opportunity. "My dream is finally materialising," she says, "but now it has become bigger. I want to win a medal." To do so, she knows she has to master the game's mental aspect. "If you aren't mentally fit, no amount of physical training will help," she says. With the help of sponsors Lakshya Sports, Rani has access to a sports psychologist, who allays her fears and boosts her self-belief.

Rani took to boxing at 18 because, unlike basketball and netball, it was an individual discipline. "I didn't like that in team games you could lose because of someone else's poor form," she says. But her enthusiasm for boxing didn't go down well with her father, Rajveer Singh Vohra, a police officer, who saw it as a "*gundonwaala* game" [a game of goons]. For the first six months, Rani practised in secret at the Capt. Hawa Singh Boxing Academy in Bhiwani. "The day I'd get hurt, I'd be sad, not because I was in pain but because I knew seeing my scars, my family would make me quit," says Rani. Vohra's mind changed after a talk with her coach, Sanjay Sheoran, and thanks to Rani's own stubbornness and natural flair for boxing. In 2009, in her first year of throwing punches, she became a youth state champion and followed it up with a silver in the Youth Nationals in the 60kg category. Her father rewarded her with a bike.

Rani's journey to the top has had its rocky moments. In Diwali 2017, she burnt her hand, which kept her out for six months. Eager to make up for lost time, she hurried into training and sustained a shoulder injury. Her confidence dented, Rani felt it was better to switch to the 81kg category. In April 2019, she won the ASBC Asian Championship gold, a result that convinced India's foreign coach Raffale Bergamasco that she should return to 75kg. "Raffale had more faith in me than I had in myself," says Rani. Bergamasco still has that faith. He believes the six-time national champion and the 2014 Asian Games medallist has a shot at finishing in the top three in Tokyo. ■

—Suhani Singh

CoachSpeak

"IN THE PAST TWO YEARS, POOJA HAS IMPROVED HER COORDINATION AND GAINED A LOT OF LOWER BODY STRENGTH. IT HAS ALLOWED HER TO CHANGE HER STRATEGY AND ADAPT TO THE OPPONENT. IT ALWAYS TAKES A BIT OF LUCK, BUT I BELIEVE SHE HAS A GOOD CHANCE TO GET ON THE PODIUM"

– Raffale Bergamasco
Foreign coach of the Indian women's boxing team

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HITTING HIS STRIDE

FOUAAD MIRZA, 29

DISCIPLINE: EQUESTRIAN

CATEGORY: Individual eventing which consists of dressage, show jumping and cross country

QUALIFYING RUN: After securing an Olympic quota in 2019 by topping the rankings in the Oceania group qualifiers (Southeast Asia), Mirza met the minimum eligibility requirement with two horses in the CCI44 long eventing competition in Poland in May 2021

ACHIEVEMENTS: Double 2018 Asian Games silver medallist, winning in individual and team eventing

There are no Sundays for Fouaad Mirza. Each day begins at 7 am at a stable in Bergedorf village in Germany, where he spends time with seven to eight horses, including Seigneur Medicott, with whom he won the two Asian Games medals. In addition to riding, Mirza feeds and bathes them, takes them to graze and for hand walks. The hours spent together, says Mirza, are essential to gain the trust of the animal and build a bond. "You know when it is sad or happy, and they know when you aren't feeling too good or are a little angry," he says.

A love for horses runs in Mirza's family based in Bengaluru. His father, Dr Hasneyn Mirza, is one of India's top equine veterinarians. "Growing up, I never had a Gameboy or PlayStation," Mirza said at a press interaction. By age five, he was riding ponies at a stud farm and soon he was riding to compete. His first Junior National Championship medal stoked the fire to turn a hobby into a profession.

Equestrian sports are expensive, though, and Mirza's training abroad has been sponsored by Bengaluru's Embassy Group since 2014. He is currently coached by Sandra Auffarth, a former world champion and two-time Olympic medalist. The German rider will also compete in Tokyo.

Mirza is not the first to represent India in individual eventing—Indrajit Lamba (Atlanta 1996) and Imtiaz Anees (Sydney 2000) came before. But Mirza made history at the 2018 Asian Games in Jakarta when he ended India's 36-year-old medal drought in the sport with two silvers. The medals gave a huge publicity boost to the sport in India and helped Mirza win the Arjuna Award in 2019. "Among the equestrian community in India, a lot of people are motivated to pursue the sport," says Mirza, ranked world #70. "It will take some time to grow but it is moving in the right direction."

MentorSpeak

"EVENTING IS THE TRUEST TEST OF A HORSE AND A RIDER. YOU HAVE TO BE ACCURATE IN DRESSAGE, PASS THE GRUELLING CROSS COUNTRY AND HAVE THE STAMINA FOR TWO ROUNDS OF SHOW JUMPING. FOUAAD IS CERTAINLY NOT THERE TO BE PART OF THE FURNITURE. HE WILL PUT ON A BOLD SHOW AND GIVE IT HIS BEST"

–Dr Hasneyn Mirza
Equine veterinarian &
Fouaad's father

A medal in Tokyo could be a bigger fillip. "I am not interested in going there just to make up the numbers," says Mirza. "I am going there to give it my ultimate best and, hopefully, I will finish among the top few." In equestrian sport, though, it takes two to win. India's hopes, too, will be riding on Seigneur Medicott. ■

—Suhani Singh

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IRS 2019 Q4 (TR)

THRUST & PARRY

C.A. BHAVANI DEVI, 27

DISCIPLINE: FENCING (SABRE)

QUALIFYING RUN: Through the Adjusted Official Ranking (AOR) method at the Fencing World Cup in Hungary in March. Devi's No. 42 world ranking helped her grab one of the two individual spots open for the Asian and Oceania region

ACHIEVEMENTS: First Indian fencer to win a gold medal at the Turnoi Satellite Fencing Championships in Iceland in 2017; first Indian to win a gold medal at the senior Commonwealth Fencing Championship in Canberra in 2019

Held once every four years, the Olympic Games now also mean Indians are discovering sports they had little clue about earlier. For the Tokyo Games, sports enthusiasts could begin by familiarising themselves with fencing, for they finally have someone to cheer for in the discipline. C.A. Bhavani Devi is the first Indian to qualify since 1896 when the sport was first introduced. Devi, who will compete in sabre (a light sword with a cutting edge through which the fencer looks to target everything above the waist), is well aware that this is her best shot to get Indians curious about a sport where athletes dress in all white and have their faces shielded behind a mask. "Indians will probably be watching fencing for the first time since I'm competing," says Devi. "Which is also why I want to give my best performance. I just want to make them proud."

Devi didn't choose fencing; she was stuck with it. At the Muruga Dhanushkodi Girls Higher Secondary School in Chennai, Devi and her sixth standard classmates had to pick between squash, gymnastics, volleyball and fenc-

AUGUSTO BIZZI

CoachSpeak

“HER STRONGEST ATTRIBUTE IS HER CHARACTER. WHEN SHE DECIDES TO DO SOMETHING, SHE WILL DO EVERYTHING TO ATTAIN HER GOAL. SHE NEVER SETS A LIMIT FOR HERSELF, SHE DOES THINGS WHICH OTHERS FIND DIFFICULT OR DON’T REALISE CAN HAPPEN. SHE IS THAT STRONG IN HER MIND. IT’S HOW SHE MADE THIS OLYMPIC DREAM A REALITY”

–Nicola Zanotti
Devi’s coach since 2016

ing. By the time Devi’s turn came, all six spots in the other sports had been filled. “I didn’t know anything about it but I was happy to play with a sword,” says Devi, who initially fenced with a wooden stick. Within a year, she had won gold in the nationals in the under-14 category. But to truly excel in it, Devi realised she needed to learn from the best in India. At 16, she left home and moved to the Sports Authority of India centre in Thalassery, Kerala, to train under Sagar Lagu, one of India’s finest fencing coaches.

In a nation where the conversation around sports begins and ends with cricket, Devi’s decision to pick a little-known sport meant embarking on a path marred with obstacles. Fencing hardly draws any sponsors, so Devi’s parents took loans to send her abroad to train and compete. Devi even turned to crowdfunding websites to raise money. “Between 2011 and 2015, it was really hard,” she says. “I was stressed and I even contemplated giving it all up.”

But even in times of adversity, Devi was making history. In 2015, she won bronze at the Under-23 Asian Championship and at the Flemish Open. Recognition would soon follow. GoSports Foundation selected her for its Rahul Dravid Athlete Mentorship Programme and provided her assistance with nutrition, mental conditioning, injury rehabilitation and more. The next year, the Tamil Nadu state government selected her for the Special Scholarship Scheme for Elite Sportspersons, which came with financial assistance of Rs 25 lakh per year. In April 2021, Bhavani joined a select list of Target Olympic Podium Scheme-supported athletes.

Since November 2020, Devi’s Tokyo preparations have been unfolding in Livorno, Italy, where the *sabreuse* works with coach Nicola Zanotti. “She lives for fencing. She always works hard and more than the others,” says Zanotti, who has been working with Devi since 2016. “We can help athletes to reach a high level only if they are dedicated and have the right mentality to learn and improve. She is the perfect student.” Devi spends Monday to Saturday training in camps which feature other Olympic-bound fencers. In Italy, unlike India, fencing flourishes and there are multiple academies. The nation has won a medal in each edition of the Games. “The level [of play] is very high and there’s high-quality, intense and competitive training,” says Devi. “There are better sparring partners too.” In Tokyo, the odds may be stacked against her but, for India, Bhavani’s one quick stride to attack and earn a point is a giant step for the sport in itself. ■

—Suhani Singh

DAVID J. PHILLIP/AP

TOKYO 2020

HIGH FLYER

M. SREESHANKAR, 22

DISCIPLINE: ATHLETICS

CATEGORY: Long Jump

QUALIFYING RUN: Cleared the Olympics qualifying mark (8.22 metres) in his fifth attempt with 8.26 metres at the Federation Cup in Patiala in March 2021

ACHIEVEMENTS: Ranked 38 in the world, he has crossed the 8m mark on five occasions and holds the national record. Won bronze at the 2018 Asian Junior Athletics Championships in Gifu and finished sixth at the 2018 Asian Games

Murali Sreeshankar knew he would be an Olympian long before anyone else. At the age of 12, he created his email ID olympianshankar@gmail.com when he switched from sprint events to long jump. His father, S. Murali, a former athlete, felt his son was dreaming too big. “I was more worried about the disappointments,” he says. But Sreeshankar was determined. A decade later, his dream finally comes true.

Sports runs in the family. Sreeshankar’s mother, K.S. Bijimol, won a silver medal in 800 metres in the 1992 Asian Track Field Championship and his younger sister Sreeparvathy is a heptathlete. It was his father, though, a triple jumper, who noticed his potential as a sprinter when a four-year-old Sreeshankar began accompanying him to his practices. “I know sprinters have a short life span, so I introduced him to long jump,” says S. Murali, also his son’s coach. It helped that Sreeshankar took to the sport immediately. “It’s like flying,” says Sreeshankar. “Whenever I make a good jump, I can feel it in the air and it gets to my heart.”

Athletics has not been India’s forte in the Olympics. There have been national heartbreaks in track and field—Milkha Singh in 1960 and P.T. Usha in 1984, losing out on a 400-metre bronze by one-10th and one-100th of a second, respectively. Sreeshanker, though, relatively unknown, doesn’t carry the same burden of expectations as they did.

The young athlete has spent the past year training in Palakkad, Kerala. However, due to the pandemic, things haven’t been easy. Sreeshankar has had no international exposure in the past year, which has made assessing his form against his rivals difficult. This year, he has participated only in national events in Patiala. Sreeshankar’s focus, though, has not wavered. In the Murali household, too, all energies are focused on motivating the first-time Olympian, the five Olympic rings omnipresent—engraved on the front door, emblazoned on the glass table in the living room. “Our prime concern is the future of our children,” says S. Murali. “We are ready to spend what we have on them so that they can become great sports personalities of India.” ■

—Jeemon Jacob

CoachSpeak

“SREESHANKAR HAS BEEN IMPROVING HIS PERFORMANCE BY 25-30cm ANNUALLY AND IS ADAPTING TO NEW TECHNIQUES. IF EVERYTHING WORKS OUT, HE WILL CLEAR A DISTANCE BETWEEN 8.38m AND 8.45m”

—**S. Murali**, father and coach, former triple jumper and a silver medalist,1987 South Asian Games

GETTY IMAGES

VAULTING AMBITION

PRANATI NAYAK, 26

DISCIPLINE: ARTISTIC GYMNASTICS (VAULT)

QUALIFYING RUN: A bronze in the vault at the Senior Artistic Gymnastics Asian Championship in 2019

ACHIEVEMENTS: She is only the third Indian gymnast to win a major vaulting medal

The uncertainty of the past few months finally ended for Pranati Nayak in May when she made the cut for the Tokyo Olympics. Last year, the pandemic disrupted her routine with her usual training base at the Sports Authority of India (SAI) in Kolkata out of bounds due to the lockdown. She also didn't know what she was working towards, with her Olympic qualification hanging in the balance. Yet, Nayak continued training with the few resources at hand. She made the most of the gymnastics clubs around Kolkata between December and March, trying to maintain fitness and a routine. "For around 15 months, it was not possible to work at a good level. I was training at about 25 per cent of my usual level, managing just a few basic drills," says Nayak. "But even that was of great help as I could resume working at an optimum level once I had access to the SAI facility."

A phone call last month made the hard work worthwhile. The Senior Asian Championships, to be held in Hangzhou, China, had been cancelled. Nayak's bronze in the vault in the 2019 edition of the event was enough to help her qualify for the Olympics through the continental quota.

It was down to coach Lakhan Sharma to ease her back into a rigorous training routine. The two decided to stick to a routine she was familiar with, instead of experimenting with anything new. She also connected with Olympian Dipa Karmakar, who made it to the vault finals at the Rio Games in 2016. Like Karmakar, Nayak counts the vaulting table as her favourite apparatus and her best shot at winning a medal. While she won't be attempting the daunting Produnova manoeuvre that her compatriot did, Nayak has been practicsng the Tsukahara back 720, which involves two and a half rotations with twists. It is the fourth highest rated vault in the International Gymnastics Federation's Code of Points.

Nayak is also focusing on the mental aspect of the sport, spending a lot of time working with a psychologist. Time off at the weekend is spent watching movies that inspire her—*Kung Fu Panda* is a favourite. This is also when she gets to talk to her parents; her father is a retired bus driver and he and her mother live in Karkai village in the West Midnapore district in Bengal. The Nayaks are accustomed to having their daughter away from home. "I first came to Kolkata to train when I was eight and, since then, haven't spent more than 20 days at home [at a stretch] until the lockdown last year," she says.

Nayak's potential as a gymnast was spotted by Minara Begum, a coach at SAI Kolkata, who trained her in the early years. The odds are stacked against her, but a tattoo on her right ankle serves as a constant reminder of the things she hopes to achieve. Says Nayak, "I decided to get a fairy inked because I'm a gymnast. I want to soar high on the vault when the moment comes." ■

— *Shail Desai*

MentorSpeak

"PRANATI HAS BEEN PERFORMING REALLY WELL SINCE 2015. VAULTING IS HER STRONG POINT. I TOLD HER TO TREAT THE OLYMPICS JUST LIKE ANOTHER PRACTICE SESSION, ESPECIALLY AS THERE WILL BE NO SPECTATORS IN TOKYO. SHE'LL DO WELL"

–Dipa Karmakar
Gymnast

OLYMPIC CALENDAR

SPORTING HIGHLIGHTS AND SOME BIG DAYS FOR INDIAN ATHLETES

Illustrations by SIDDHANT JUMDE

FRI JULY 23

India's top archers, **Deepika Kumari** and **Atanu Das,** need to finish in top 32 to progress

SAT JULY 24

Shooters **Elavenil Valarivan** (10m rifle) and **Saurabh Chaudhary** and **Abhishek Verma** (10m pistol) bid for gold

Mirabai Chanu looks to become only the second weightlifter after Karnam Malleswari to win a medal

Atanu Das and world no. 1 Deepika Kumari at **mixed team archery event**

Paddlers Manika Batra and Sharath Kamal compete in mixed doubles round of 16. **P.V. Sindhu's** quest for back-to-back Olympic medals begins

Men's hockey team takes on New Zealand; women's face the Netherlands

SUN JULY 25

Yashaswini Singh Deswal and **Manu Bhaker** (10m pistol) and **Divyansh Singh Panwar** (10m rifle) aim for podium finish

Mary Kom and teammates Pooja Rani and Manish Kaushik begin boxing campaign

Nethra Kumanan is first woman to represent India in Olympic sailing

Men's hockey side has a tough match against no. 1 Australia

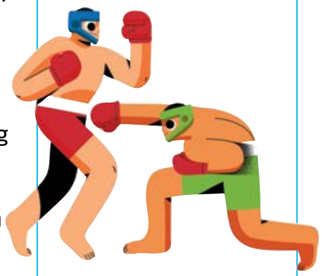
Pranati Nayak will hope for a top eight finish in vault to make it to the finals

MON JULY 26

Sajan Prakash aims for semis of 200m butterfly

Archers Atanu Das, Pravin Jadhav and Tarundeep Rai target for 10s in the men's team event

Amit Panghal, India's best bet for a **boxing** medal, takes to the ring



C.A. Bhavani Devi is first Indian to compete in **fencing**

Women's hockey team is up against Germany

TUE JULY 27

American gymnasts eye their third consecutive gold in women's team event

Saurabh Chaudhary and Manu Bhaker compete in **10m air pistol mixed** event

It's **India vs Spain** in men's hockey

In pool action, men's **200m freestyle finals** and men's and women's **100m backstroke finals**

WED JULY 28

Defending champions Japan face Russia and China for **artistic gymnastics** men's team gold

Spain vs Argentina in men's football

Women's hockey action sees **India vs Great Britain**

THU JULY 29

Two-time Olympic champion Shelly-Ann Fraser-Pryce hits the track as **100m heats** begin

American swimmer Caeleb Dressel's campaign begins with men's **100m freestyle finals** and 100m butterfly heats

American **gymnast Simone Biles** is on a mission to win consecutive women's all-around titles

Men's hockey: **India vs Argentina**

Table tennis: Women's singles finals

FRI JULY 30

Archery: Women's quarter-finals, semis and finals

Freestyle queen **Emma McKeon,** defending Olympic and world champion **Simone Manuel** and world record holder **Sarah Sjostrom** in 50m heats

Rahi Sarnobat and **Manu Bhaker** compete in **25m pistol** event

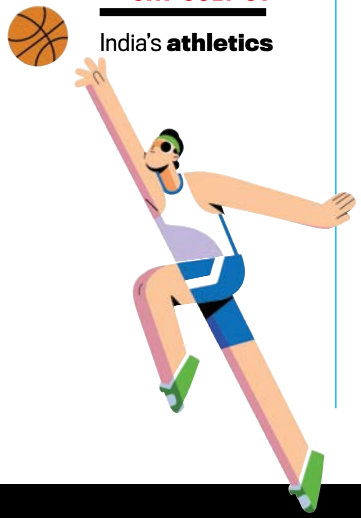
Fouaad Mirza and his horse put their best feet forward

India take on hosts Japan in **men's hockey**

Women's hockey: **India vs Ireland**

SAT JULY 31

India's **athletics** campaign begins with discus throwers **Kamalpreet Kaur**, who has the sixth biggest throw of 2021 with 66.59m, and **Seema Punia**



Olympic debut for **BMX freestyle**

Catch the high-flying Frenchman **Armand Duplantis**, the world record holder in pole vault

Archery: Men's individual quarter-finals, semis, finals

Athletics: Women's **100m finals**

Women's hockey: India vs South Africa

Tennis: Women's singles finals

SUN AUG 1

Artistic gymnastics: Women's vault and uneven bars and men's pommel horse and floor exercise apparatus finals

Swimming concludes with five finals, including men's and women's medley relays

Athletics: Men's **100m finals**

Badminton: Women's singles finals

Tennis: Men's singles finals

MON AUG 2

Can World no. 2 **Aishwary Pratap Tomar** make it to the men's 50m rifle three positions final?

An **underwater marvel, artistic swimming** tests the endurance, grace and synchronisation of swimmers

Artistic gymnastics: Men's rings and vault and women's floor exercise apparatus finals

Athletics: Long jump final

Badminton: Men's singles finals

TUE AUG 3

Wrestler Sonam Malik, 19, in action in 62kg event

All eyes on reigning Asian Games shot put champion **Tajinderpal Singh Toor**

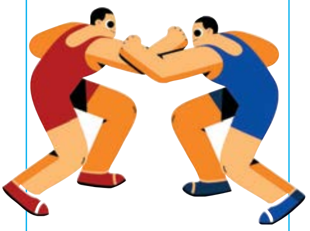
Artistic gymnastics: Finals of parallel bars, horizontal bar and balance beam

Athletics: Women's **200m and 800m finals**

WED AUG 4

Javelin throwers **Neeraj Chopra** and **Shivpal Singh** compete in qualification round. Finals of **men's 200m and 800m races**

Deepak Punia (86 kg), former world junior champion, **Ravi Kumar Dahiya** (57 kg) and **Anshu Malik** (57 kg) take to the mat as **wrestling duels** begin



THU AUG 5

Athletics: Men's shot put final

Boxing: Men's featherweight finals

Hockey: Men's final

Wrestler Vinesh Phogat, seeded no. 1 in her weight category (53kg). Men's shot put and 110m hurdles final

Sports climbing makes its debut. Athletes scale vertical walls relying on the strength in their fingertips and toes

FRI AUG 6

Bajrang Punia makes his Olympics debut against a formidable field in the 65kg category

Athletics: Women's and men's **4X100m relay finals**

Football: Women's gold match

Hockey: Women's final

SAT AUG 7

Athletics: Men's javelin throw final, 4X400 men's and women's relay finals

Basketball: Men's gold medal match

Football: Men's final

SUN AUG 8

Rhythmic gymnastics: Expect entertaining routines with props such as ribbons, clubs, hoop and ball

Basketball: Women's gold medal match

Illustration by RAJ VERMA

THE BIG IPO RUSH

Indian companies are making a beeline for the stock market, to ride its inexplicable buoyancy even in the midst of a pandemic. This year's pipeline of new issues, as cleared by Sebi, is already worth around Rs 34,000 crore

BY M.G. ARUN

Even as the pandemic plays havoc with lives and livelihoods, the Indian stock markets, apparently unaffected by it all, have been buoyant—almost as if in a parallel universe. Even the dismal economic outlook has not got in the way of this stock market exuberance. The BSE (Bombay Stock Exchange) Sensex has risen 82 per cent in roughly 15 months, from 29,468 on March 31, 2020, to 53,880 on July 7 this year. According to a State Bank of India (SBI) report, 14.2 million new individual investors joined the stock markets in 2020-21, a year in which the economy was mauled by Covid-19.

That's not all. The buoyancy of the stock market (also called the secondary market) has set in motion a fundraising spree among corporates in the primary market (where new securities or shares get listed), with 69 companies raising about Rs 75,000 crore through public issues, including an Initial Public Offering (IPO) of shares, in 2020-21. This April-May, 20 companies filed their Draft Red Herring Prospectus (DRHP) with market regulator Sebi (Securities and Exchange Board of India). For FY2021-22, companies are expected to raise more than double of what they did in the previous fiscal. The IPO of public sector insurance giant LIC (Life Insurance Corporation of India) alone is slated to generate around Rs 70,000 crore. "This year will be a record one in the history of IPOs in India," says Jibi

Jacob, MD and head, capital markets, Edelweiss Financial Services. Payments firm Paytm is also reportedly planning a $2.3 billion (around Rs 17,000 crore) IPO and will be filing a DRHP soon.

Companies across a range of sectors have approached Sebi with IPO plans—health firms such as Glenmark Life Sciences and Windlas Biotech; food aggregator Zomato; Devyani International, a franchisee for Pizza Hut, KFC and Costa Coffee in India; Aditya Birla Sun Life AMC; the Wadia Group-promoted Go Air; and chemical firms Clean Science & Technology and Chemplast Sanmar. While earlier, the market witnessed companies bunching up sector-wise—real estate, infrastructure or technology—this time round, the list is completely diverse with no weightage to any particular sector.

Riding the wave

What explains the buoyancy in the stock markets in the midst of an economic slump? The markets have taken heart from various factors, such as listed firms beating all odds to post good performance during the pandemic, the low interest rate regime, the flourishing commodity cycle, the stimulus offered by the Centre and the RBI (Reserve Bank of India), and India's Covid vaccination drive that aims to cover the entire adult population by December this year.

"Markets run ahead of time. Optimism becomes over-optimism and pessimism over-pessimism," says Arun Kejriwal, a stock market expert and founder of Kejriwal Research & Investment Services. One of the reasons for the zest in the stock markets is the massive liquidity that the RBI has pumped into the Covid-stricken financial sector, starting March last year when it gave a Rs 3.74 lakh crore liquidity boost to the system. The measures also included a huge 75 basis points cut in the repo rate (the rate at which the RBI lends to commercial banks). A basis point is a hundredth of a percentage point. "The unintended beneficiaries of all these, along with the MSME (micro, small and medium enterprises) sector, were the organised, large companies, who were able to access capital, optimise costs and quickly get back on their feet," says Sandip Khetan, partner and national leader, financial accounting advisory services, with consulting firm EY India.

The pandemic has spurred a new way of thinking among Indian corporates. Companies have benefited from keeping their costs under tight control. Most have pruned jobs and salaries and put a freeze on recruitments. The other major

TAPPING THE STOCK MARKETS

COMPANIES THAT HAVE RECEIVED SEBI CLEARANCE TO LAUNCH IPOs

COMPANY, INDUSTRY	**ESTIMATED ISSUE AMOUNT** (₹ crore)
ZOMATO, Food and food processing	**9,375**
BAJAJ ENERGY, Power generation and supply	**5,450**
CHEMPLAST SANMAR, Chemicals	**3,500**
SAMHI HOTELS, Hotels, resorts, restaurants and tourism	**2,000**
AROHAN FINANCIAL SERVICES, Financial services, investments	**1,800**
GLENMARK LIFE SCIENCES, Pharmaceuticals and drugs	**1,800**
UTKARSH SMALL FINANCE BANK, Financial services, investments	**1,350**
PURANIK BUILDERS*, Housing, civil construction, real estate	**1,000**
APEEJAY SURRENDRA PARK HOTELS, Hotels, resorts, restaurants and tourism	**1,000**
ESAF SMALL FINANCE BANK, Banking, term lending	**976**
SHRIRAM PROPERTIES*, Housing, civil construction, real estate	**800**
INDIAN RENEWABLE ENERGY DEVELOPMENT AGENCY*, Banking, term lending	**750**
SEVEN ISLANDS SHIPPING*, Travel, transportation, courier	**600**
ROLEX RINGS, Automobile components, ancillaries	**600**
MONTECARLO*, Roads and highways	**550**
SHYAM STEEL INDUSTRIES, Steel, sponge iron, pig iron	**500**
SHRI BAJRANG POWER & ISPAT, Steel, sponge iron, pig iron	**500**
NATIONAL COMMODITY & DERIVATIVES EXCHANGE, Financial services, investments	**500**
TATVA CHINTAN PHARMA CHEM, Pharmaceuticals and drugs	**500**
ANNAI INFRA DEVELOPERS, Engineering	**250**
EXXARO TILES, Ceramics, marble, granite, sanitaryware	**160**
MUKESH TRENDS Lifestyle, Textiles	**70**
JAIKUMAR CONSTRUCTIONS, Housing, civil construction, real estate	Not specified

As on July 2, 2021; another 23 firms have filed offer documents with Sebi and are awaiting approval

***REFILED**

Source: Prime Database

savings have been on indirect costs. A lot of corporate activity is happening remotely, resulting in big saving in terms of selling, general and administrative expenses. Experts say companies have saved about 3-5 per cent of their total expenditure as meetings shifted to online platforms.

The new breed of investors who began trading from the confines of their homes also helped give the markets buoyancy. As the markets thrived, companies that had been looking to raise capital for a long time found it to be an ideal opportunity. Firms going into listing expect a higher value for shares when the market is trading at record highs, compared to other times. Moreover, in April last year, Sebi granted a one-time relaxation in its primary market fundraising norms to make it easier for companies to raise capital during the pandemic. The Rs 53,125 crore rights issue of Reliance Industries in May 2020 also helped lift the spirits of a market battling the Covid challenge. A rights issue is an invitation to existing shareholders to purchase additional new shares in the company.

Another reason for the rise in IPOs is the private equity investors, who have been waiting for the right opportunity to exit firms they invested in. These players are at a point where their investments have matured, and the companies they invested in are able to scale up faster and the acceptability of their models has improved manifold during the pandemic. Also called Offer for Sale (OFS), the mechanism allows promoters to reduce their holdings in listed companies in a transparent manner. Unlike the money raised by offering fresh equity in an IPO, which will be used as growth capital by a firm, money raised through OFS goes to investors offering their equity for sale.

Media reports say over the past eight years, of the total issue amount of Rs 1.94 lakh crore raised by 160 IPOs, over 75 per cent (Rs 1.46 lakh crore) was through OFS. "A decade ago, people would have been worried about such exits. But the Indian market is maturing," says Jacob. Investors look at a business model and check whether a company is raising enough capital for, say, two years of growth and, on top of it, doing an OFS. As long as investors are comfortable with the growth trajectory of a firm, they do not really worry if it is an OFS or not.

82%

Rise of BSE Sensex in about **15 months,** from 29,468 points on March 31, 2020, to 53,880 on July 7, 2021

14.2 million

New individual investors who joined the stock markets in 2020-21

₹75,000 cr

What 69 companies raised through public issues in 2020-21

Start-up valuation

The markets are watching how the listing of start-ups would go. Among the start-ups reportedly going for IPOs are Paytm, Zomato, lifestyle portal Nykaa, Flipkart and Pepperfry. Paytm, Zomato and Nykaa are 'unicorns', or firms with a valuation of over $1 billion (about Rs 7,400 crore). While many of these start-ups have amassed scale, most are yet to turn profitable.

How will the stock markets, where profits and performance of companies will be scrutinised threadbare, value these companies? The general view is that investors are going to value start-ups depending upon how dominant they are in the space that they are operating in, how much access they have to capital, and their ability to continuously acquire market share. "If they (start-ups) are successful, a lot of capital is going to come to India, and then we don't have to go outside India to raise money," says Khetan.

When start-ups were founded, they were disrupting the incumbents and have now become sizeable players in their areas of operations. Public markets will need a visibility as to when these companies will break even and make profit or some of the key performance indicators need to be redefined for appropriate valuation of these companies in future. As long as that is assured, start-ups too become attractive.

Retail investors' concerns

Experts have a word of caution for investors looking to subscribe to IPOs. "Someone not investing in the right quality of stock or not looking at governance may end up with disappointing returns," says Khetan. "However, it is important for the country for continuous financialisation of people's savings, in a structured way, and with a long-term view." Other asset classes, including real estate, gold or interest on savings, have not given such significant returns over a period of time, he adds.

The general advice from experts is that if retail investors have concerns regarding a particular stock, they should stay away. "Move to large caps (big and well-established companies) where there is safety. You don't have a single large cap company which doesn't have a brick-and-mortar play, be in FMCG, IT or pharma. They have tangible businesses and customers," says Kejriwal, adding that dabbling in new ventures should not be at the expense of a retail investor's core investment. Even small investors need to balance their portfolios and should have stocks that give steady returns. It is not advisable to put the entire investment in the high-risk, high-return portfolio.

Most experts believe that the highs in the markets are sustainable, and even if a correction happens, the markets will remain at levels better than last year. The upcoming IPOs, while giving investors a chance to be part of promising firms, will also be an acid test of their real value as assigned by their shareholders. ■

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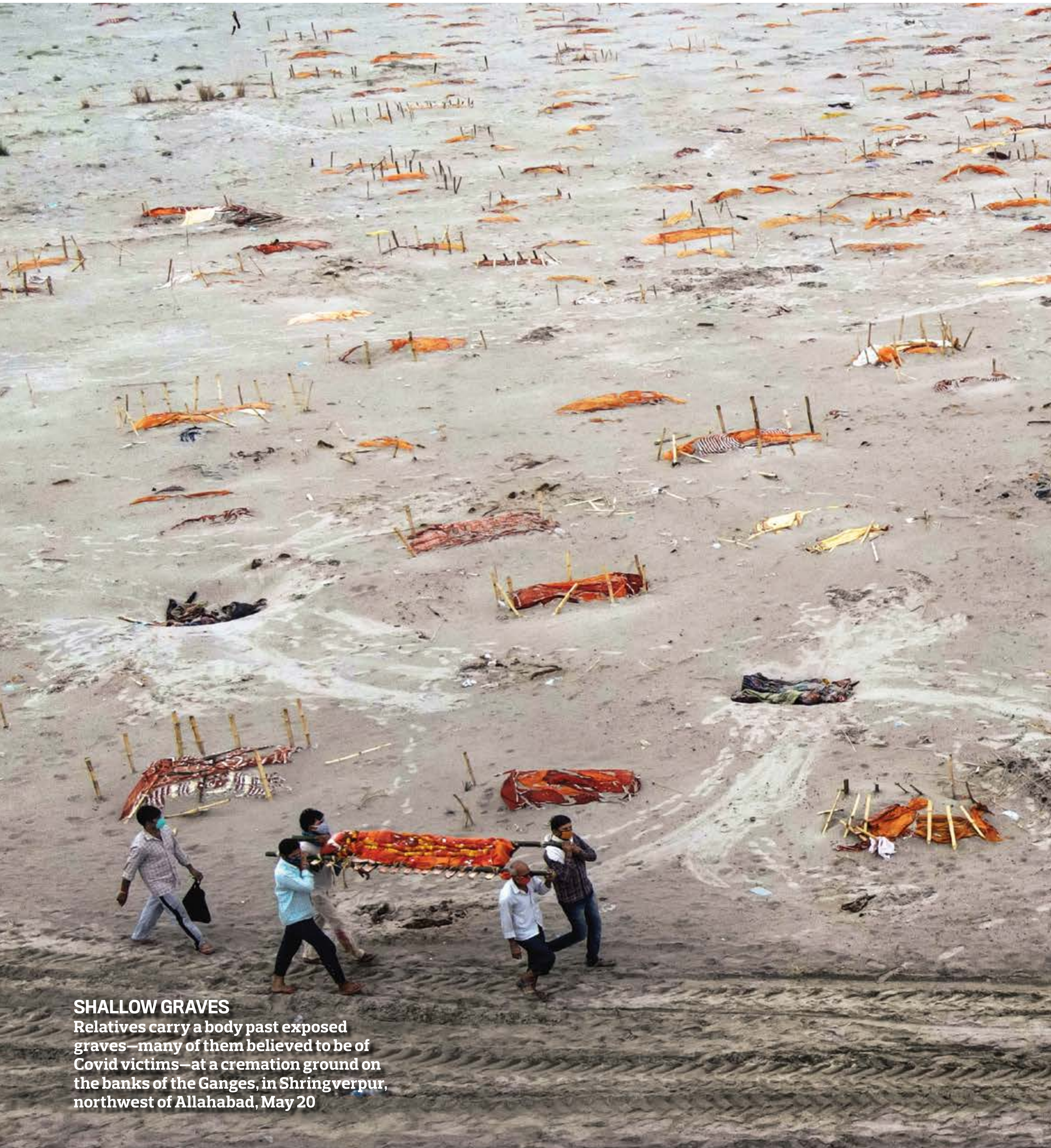
COVID DEATHS

THE MISSING



SHALLOW GRAVES
Relatives carry a body past exposed graves—many of them believed to be of Covid victims—at a cremation ground on the banks of the Ganges, in Shringverpur, northwest of Allahabad, May 20

DEAD

It's now common knowledge that official Covid death figures grossly understate the reality. But why did this happen— systemic failure or worse?

BY KAUSHIK DEKA

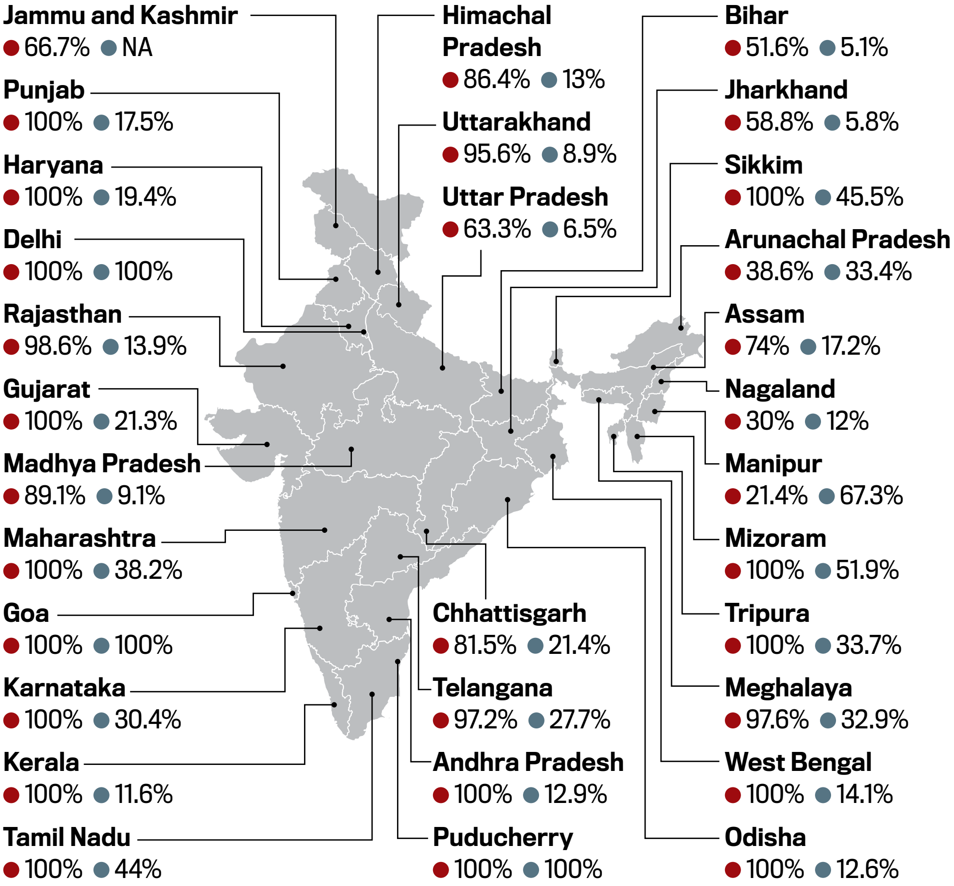
RITESH SHUKLA/ GETTY IMAGES

In the first week of April, Manoj Tomar, 40, a daily wage earner from JP Nagar in Old Bhopal, got a cough and fever that wouldn't go away. A breathless Tomar, suspecting he had Covid, looked for a testing centre but there was none nearby. On April 7, he went to a local quack, a "*jhola chaap*" doctor. A rapid antigen test detected the Covid virus in his body, but Manoj could not find a bed at any of the government hospitals. Later that evening, he died. A week later, his brother Jitendra, 38, also developed symptoms but was able to get himself admitted at the Government Hamidia Hospital, where he too tested positive for Covid. Later, he also died. While the family got a death certificate from the hospital stating that Jitendra had died of Covid, they had no such luck with Manoj.

The story of the two brothers from Bhopal illustrates the irony in India's management of Covid dead statistics. The importance of an accurate death count came into focus again following a recent Supreme Court order asking the Centre to pay ex gratia compensation to the families of those who had died of Covid (see box *Will the Covid deaths imbroglio impact compensation?*). A PIL in the top court has also pointed out that the non-reporting of Covid as the cause of death could deny government compensation to many affected families. But now a bigger challenge arises for the system—creating an accurate, comprehensive list of eligible claimants. With compensation being made mandatory, many, like Manoj's family, will now be scrambling to get that elusive death certificate that puts down Covid as the cause of death.

The official death toll in India, the second most populous country in the world, has certainly not reflected those horrific images that played out on national television, particularly during the second wave—people gasping for oxygen, long queues in hospitals and crematoriums, the incessant sirens of vans carrying bodies, and then the bodies floating in the Gan-

HOW THE STATES HAVE TRACKED DEATHS



Jammu and Kashmir	● 66.7%	● NA
Punjab	● 100%	● 17.5%
Haryana	● 100%	● 19.4%
Delhi	● 100%	● 100%
Rajasthan	● 98.6%	● 13.9%
Gujarat	● 100%	● 21.3%
Madhya Pradesh	● 89.1%	● 9.1%
Maharashtra	● 100%	● 38.2%
Goa	● 100%	● 100%
Karnataka	● 100%	● 30.4%
Kerala	● 100%	● 11.6%
Tamil Nadu	● 100%	● 44%
Himachal Pradesh	● 86.4%	● 13%
Uttarakhand	● 95.6%	● 8.9%
Uttar Pradesh	● 63.3%	● 6.5%
Chhattisgarh	● 81.5%	● 21.4%
Telangana	● 97.2%	● 27.7%
Andhra Pradesh	● 100%	● 12.9%
Puducherry	● 100%	● 100%
Bihar	● 51.6%	● 5.1%
Jharkhand	● 58.8%	● 5.8%
Sikkim	● 100%	● 45.5%
Arunachal Pradesh	● 38.6%	● 33.4%
Assam	● 74%	● 17.2%
Nagaland	● 30%	● 12%
Manipur	● 21.4%	● 67.3%
Mizoram	● 100%	● 51.9%
Tripura	● 100%	● 33.7%
Meghalaya	● 97.6%	● 32.9%
West Bengal	● 100%	● 14.1%
Odisha	● 100%	● 12.6%

● % of registered deaths to all deaths in the country in 2019
● % of medically certified deaths to total registered deaths in 2019

Sources: Vital statistics of India based on the civil registration system 2019; report on medical certification of cause of death 2019

ga in Uttar Pradesh and Bihar. It was evident that India was no exception to the rule—the World Health Organization estimates that the deaths globally could be 2-3 times the officially reported numbers. *The Economist*, using a mathematical model, had estimated around one million Covid-19 deaths in India as on May 15, as against the official tally of 270,319. Another article in the *New York Times* claimed that up to 5-7 times more people may have died above and beyond the official count.

The Union government dismissed these studies as "unsound analysis" and extrapolation of data "without any epidemiological evidence", but the subsequent reconciliation of death numbers by various states indicated there were huge gaps between the official Covid-induced death count and actual numbers of the deceased on the ground. In June, at least six states—Maharashtra, Bihar, Uttarakhand, Goa, Uttar Pradesh, and Punjab—revised their death count, resulting in a sudden spike in official records. And the numbers are growing with every revision. India isn't the only country to see such a reconciliation. Even in the US, states such as Indiana, Oklahoma and Maryland have noted backlogged deaths.

The recount in the states was triggered by several factors, including the announcement of compensation for Covid victims, court directives and media reports exposing the undercounting. The announcement of compensation by several states naturally led to an uproar as many families were likely to be denied it as the deaths were not recorded as Covid-induced. In Bihar, for instance, the government was forced to do a 20-day exercise to audit Covid deaths after the Patna High Court red-flagged discrepancies in figures cited by different agencies in one district. The court was hearing a PIL on reports about corpses floating in the Ganga. In Maharashtra, the recount began following newspaper reports on unreported Covid deaths.

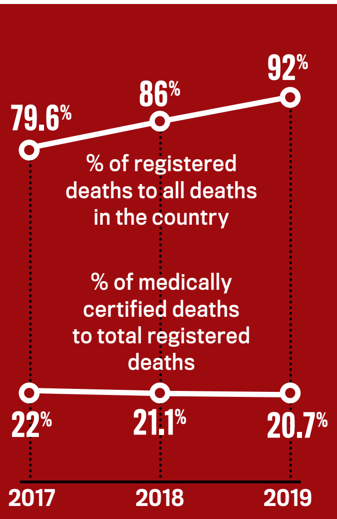
WHAT IS THE REAL COVID TOLL?

However, even the latest disclosures may still not provide the true picture. The all-cause mortality numbers from India's Civil Registration System (CRS) of various states show a massive jump in excess deaths, hinting that the extra mortality may have been due to the pandemic. Excess deaths are typically defined as the difference between the observed numbers of deaths in a specific time period in a year and the number of deaths in the same time period in another year. In national capital New Delhi, the comparison of CRS data shows that April 2021 had 242 per cent more deaths than April 2020.

Down south, the Tamil Nadu government's CRS revealed that over 142,000 more people have died between January 1 and June 25 this year, as compared to the same

HOW DID THE PATIENT DIE?

Registration of deaths has improved, but only one in five state the cause of death



32%
Share of institutional deaths among total registered deaths in India

7
Death rate per 1,000 people in India during normal times

Sources: Vital statistics of India based on the civil registration system 2019; report on medical certification of cause of death 2019

period in 2019, a non-Covid year. Of these excess deaths, only 19,929 were recorded as Covid deaths, as per the official health bulletin. More importantly, the bulk of the excess mortality in Tamil Nadu happened between April and June when the second wave was at its menacing peak.

In the same period, the CRS data for Madhya Pradesh revealed 42 times excess deaths; they were 34 times more in Andhra Pradesh and five times more in Karnataka. The four states—Tamil Nadu, MP, AP and Karnataka—are home to 21 per cent of India's population. Together, they have shown half a million excess deaths in the first five months of 2021, but they report only 46,000 Covid deaths. In the Telangana capital Hyderabad, in the first five months of 2021, excess deaths were 8.2 times the official Covid toll for the entire state.

Several experts, however, caution against "inferring too much" from the CRS data. One reason behind the hike in excess deaths is the continuous improvement in the death registration process in India, resulting in better data management. Data recently released by the Census department of India shows that 92 per cent deaths were registered in 2019, up from 66 per cent in 2011. This also marked the ninth consecutive year in which death registration rates showed an increase.

Besides, the pandemic indirectly killed many people who were not infected but had other serious ailments. As medical infrastructure got overburdened with Covid management, many of these patients could not access critical care, and some succumbed. "The CRS data could be a good indicator for understanding the devastation caused by the virus but let's not forget that a large number of non-Covid deaths also happened this year. Lack of beds in hospitals as well as the restrictions on movement due to lockdowns led to many deaths as treatment could not be given in time," says K. Sujatha Rao, a former Union health secretary.

THE MISSING CAUSE OF DEATH

Despite the national improvement, India's performance has been abysmal in terms of attributing cause while registering a death. The scheme of Medical Certification of Cause of Death (MCCD) under the Registration of Births and Deaths (RBD) Act, 1969, makes it mandatory to provide cause of death for registration. Yet, as the annual MCCD report for 2019 shows, only 20.7 per cent—or one in five—registered deaths in India mentioned cause. It is less than one in 40 in Bihar, about one in 30 in Jharkhand and one in 25 in Uttar Pradesh. Even in states like Kerala, Andhra Pradesh and Odisha, which boast 100 per cent registration of deaths, only 11-12 per cent are medically certified with a cause of death. What's even more worrying is that the share of medically certified deaths across the country has seen a dip over the years—from 22 per cent in 2017 to 21.1 per cent in 2018.

Even in cases where the cause of death is recorded, norms are not followed most of the time. The form used for death certification is based on WHO guidelines, which stipulate that the immediate cause and all underlying causes must be identified and certified by a doctor. In 2016, when a special team commissioned by the Registrar General of India (RGI) to assess the status of civil registration visited Bihar and Assam, it found that in almost every form certifying death, the doctor stated that the person had died of 'cardio-respiratory failure'. 'This did not explain anything. There is no other way that death comes, except through failure of the heart and breathing,' wrote former IAS officer Gopalan Balagopal, who led the team.

So it's not surprising that, in a pandemic year, despite the sudden spike in the number of deaths, the majority of cases have been registered without a cause of

> **"UNDERSTANDING THE CAUSES OF DEATH IS ESSENTIAL FOR HEALTH SECTOR PLANNING AND OPTIMAL ALLOCATION OF HEALTH RESOURCES. IN THE ABSENCE OF ROBUST DATA ON THIS, GOVERNMENTS RELY ON ESTIMATES"**
>
> **Dr Chandrakant Lahariya**
> Epidemiologist and public health expert

CHANDRADEEP KUMAR

LOCKDOWN WOES With state borders closed, many people were unable to take the ashes of the dead for immersion. At Delhi's Lodhi Road crematorium, the urns pile up, May 9

death (particularly when it happened outside hospitals/ medical facilities). The provision for MCCD was extended to all medical facilities in 2012, but this has not had much effect on the ground. In India, only 32 per cent of the total registered deaths are institutional deaths. "The deaths which happen in hospitals are always certified for the cause. However, the quality of the death certification and the description of underlying causes are usually non-standardised. The WHO norms are hardly followed. Deaths that happen outside hospitals, such as at home, are merely registered and medical certification of causes is usually not done," says Dr Chandrakant Lahariya, an epidemiologist and public health and policy expert.

What has also added to the non-reporting of many Covid deaths is the insistence that only those who tested positive could be considered as such. According to ICMR (Indian Council of Medical Research) guidelines, even suspected cases (which have not been confirmed through testing) should be reported as Covid deaths. But many states did not record deaths as due to Covid in the absence of positive test results.

On October 9, 2020, the Union ministry of health and family affairs issued a letter to all states and Union territories (UTs), saying that all deaths with a diagnosis of Covid, irrespective of comorbidities, must be classified as due to Covid-19. The Centre declared that anybody who failed to register Covid deaths—even the certifying doctor—would suffer penal consequences under Section 188 of the Indian Penal Code. Experts, however, say waving the stick is not the answer, strict adherence to a more specific and a standard way of classification is. But that's often not the case. For instance, many uncertain deaths are certified as 'infection'.

Even in a state like Kerala, which has better health indicators and awareness than most, there are debates over the under-reporting of the death toll. In July last year, Dr Arun N.M., who practises general medicine in Palakkad district, was the first medical professional to challenge the official Covid death data. "I had doubts as the state government dashboard on Covid changed its style of reporting the deaths. Later, I learnt at least six deaths in my area were not recorded," Dr

Will the Covid deaths imbroglio impact compensation?

A PIL filed in the Supreme Court claims that the non-reporting of Covid as a cause of death will deny state compensation to the families of genuine Covid victims. The petition pointed out that many such deaths were shown as due to heart or lung failure and demanded that the immediate kin of every Covid victim be compensated with Rs 4 lakh as provisioned under the Disaster Management Act (DMA), 2005, for a notified disaster.

On March 14 last year, the Centre notified the Covid-19 pandemic as a national disaster. But in response to the PIL, the government submitted an affidavit ruling out ex-gratia compensation while pleading that its finances were under severe strain.

The top court, however, rejected these arguments and, on June 30, directed the Centre to frame within six weeks uniform guidelines on ex gratia payments to the affected families. It also noted that the Prime Minister-headed National Disaster Management Authority (NDMA) "failed to perform its statutory duty" by not envisaging a compensation scheme.

Meanwhile, some states announced ex gratia payment on their own for Covid deaths. The Delhi government announced Rs 5 lakh to the kin of those who died due to shortage of oxygen but only Rs 50,000 for other Covid deaths. Bihar announced Rs 4 lakh as ex gratia compensation, MP and Karnataka Rs 1 lakh. But in Karnataka, only BPL families are eligible. Former Union health secretary K. Sujatha Rao sounds a word of caution: "Compensation is needed, especially when children have been orphaned. But it should be announced only after we have robust data on death. Or it could lead to massive forgery."

Arun told INDIA TODAY.

In the first wave, the non-reporting of Covid deaths was more in rural areas, where there was a dearth of testing facilities. The stigma associated with Covid deaths also forced many, particularly in the villages, not to report such deaths which occurred at home. Experts say that at an existing death rate of seven per 1,000 people, an average village of 1,000 people should report around one death every two months. But most Indian villages have experienced deaths at a far higher rate in the two months of the second Covid-19 wave. According to Dr Manas Gumta, general secretary of the Association of Health Service Doctors in West Bengal, under-reporting is happening because around 70 per cent of people living in rural areas prefer to visit quacks to avoid testing and getting quarantined. "The actual number of deaths is definitely at least three times higher. There are many, many places in Bengal without any organised crematoriums or burial grounds and panchayats issue death certificates without attributing the cause of death," says Dr Gumta.

During the second wave, as the number of infections grew alarmingly, there was massive pressure on hospitals and testing facilities even in urban areas. A large number of people died without getting access to testing or medical facilities. In many instances, patients died even before test results came in. Many of them did not make it to the officially reported list of Covid deaths. There were also political reasons for keeping the numbers low. "Some states wanted to show they were managing the pandemic better. So, the Covid deaths were not attributed to the virus," says Rao.

WHY IS THE DEATH COUNT IMPORTANT?

The experts say this gap in attributing the exact cause of death may hugely handicap India's fight against Covid. The cause of death is extremely important in assessing the effectiveness of public health programmes. They help in determining priorities of health and medical research programmes and provide feedback for future health policy, planning and implementation. "Understanding the causes of death is essential for health sector planning and optimal allocation of health resources. In the absence of robust data on the causes of death, governments are forced to rely on estimates," says Lahariya.

While several states have now begun revising the Covid death count, there is a need for a systemic overhaul. One immediate corrective step should be a 'verbal autopsy' of the dead, especially in rural areas where there is no doctor to identify causes of death. Cause of death is ascertained here on the basis of information provided by non-medical people such as family, relatives and neighbours of the deceased. The RGI introduced the Physician Coded Verbal Autonomy (PCVA) to estimate disease burden as part of the Sample Registration System (SRS) in 2003.

A verbal autopsy can fill a critical gap in measuring Covid mortality outside of healthcare settings and in rural areas. Jharkhand was the first state to conduct verbal autopsies during the pandemic. The state did a door-to-door count in April and May 2021, and added nearly 25,500 more Covid-19 deaths—43 per cent more than the reported data. Jharkhand's example has proved that the verbal autopsy route is quite doable. The state surveyed 66 per cent of its population with the help of the existing workforce in just 10 days.

Both the Centre and other state governments must emulate such practices. At the same time, a national initiative must begin to ensure mandatory and accurate certification of the cause of death through stricter enforcement and higher awareness. ■

—with Jeemon Jacob and Romita Datta

How deaths are registered in India

India's Registration of Births and Deaths Act, 1969, mandates compulsory recording of births, deaths and stillbirths, including the medical certification of cause of death (MCCD). It is mandatory to register the death before applying for a death certificate. The death must be registered within 21 days of its occurrence with the concerned local authorities. The certificate is then issued after proper verification. Apart from other documents proving identity and address, the application must be submitted with a medical certificate of the cause of death. In most occurrences of death, particularly at home and under natural circumstances, this medical certificate is neither sought nor attached. The Civil Registration System (CRS), managed by the Registrar General of India (RGI), is the repository of all the records pertaining to birth and death for all states and UTs. The vital statistics data generated through CRS is quite useful for medical research and policy making in terms of healthcare and infrastructure.

DILIP KUMAR 1922-2021

'Dilip Kumar was both inspiration and aspiration'

Dilip Kumar's craft and personality embodied the magic that transcends Bollywood's artifice

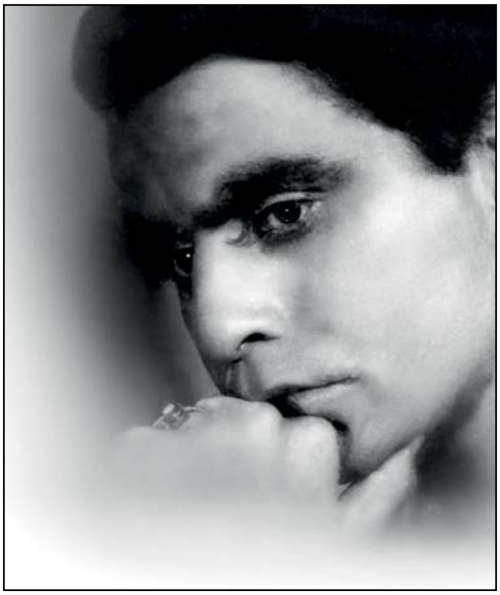
By Deepti Naval

As a student, I had a record of Lata Mangeshkar singing live at the Royal Albert Hall, and it was Dilip Kumar who introduced Lata*ji* on stage. I remember we would keep lifting the needle and bringing it back to the edge, only because we wanted to hear his voice again and again. His Urdu was magical. In 1975, I was studying in New York and Dilip *sa'ab* came with Saira Banu for a function there. I wanted to interview him for my radio show, and when I called his hotel, I heard on the other side a man speaking wonderful English. In my head, Dilip *sa'ab* only spoke crisp Urdu. I refused to believe it was him. He would later pull my leg for this. When we met for the first time, I was in complete awe of him.

Even as a little girl who was excitedly running around with her tape recorder, I knew he was endearing but I could also tell that he was humble, approachable and extremely down to earth. He was the sole reason why I did *Saudagar* (1991). I just wanted to share screen space with this legend. It was something of a lifetime opportunity for me, one I knew I couldn't miss out on. When we were on set, it would be quite an experience watching him prepare for the next scene. One would assume that someone of Dilip *sa'ab*'s stature wouldn't need any rehearsals, but in truth, he was like a child. I remember he would stand to one side and rehearse even the smallest of lines. It was such an education to see him work so hard even after so much experience, after having contributed so much.

We shot *Saudagar* in Manali. After the day's shoot, Manisha Koirala and I would go to Dilip *sa'ab*'s room to hear him and Raaj Kumar talk and reflect upon life. It was such an awesome experience to be in the presence of the finest actor we have ever known, perhaps the finest actor we will ever know.

Dilip Kumar really is the backbone of Indian cinema. For generations to come, I cannot think of a single creative person in the Hindi film industry who will not be impacted by his life and work. On the one hand, you have films like *Andaz* (1949) that cemented his reputation as the 'Tragedy King', but then on the other, you also have a *Ganga Jumna* (1961), where he puts in such an ebullient performance.


ALAMY

There is, of course, the beautiful graph of his performances, but there was also this depth to his personality which came across when he delivered a dialogue or sang a song. He was so sincere and genuine, one never felt he was acting. No performance ever seemed like a performance. It was like he always lived the character he was playing. As a result, if he was Devdas, that was the only Devdas we wanted to know. You can see the difference between a Dilip Kumar and actors who are "acting". I feel fortunate to have lived in an era where he lived and he worked, one where he impacted our lives.

I doubt if we will ever be able to measure or wash off his impact. He has set a foundation for actors already working in the industry, yes, but also for actors who are to come, actors for all times. Every actor wants the kind of screen presence he had. Everyone wants to be as believable as Dilip Kumar was. Actors today dream that someone writes them a part which allows them to deliver the kind of genuine performance Dilip *sa'ab* was always known for. For us, he was both inspiration and aspiration. ■

(as told to Shreevatsa Nevatia)

Deepti Naval *is an actor, director and writer*

AMIT TRIVEDI: THE RELUCTANT POPSTAR **PG 65**

POSTS FROM THE PAST **PG 68**

LEISURE

TAHMIMA ANAM'S NOVEL–TOO CLEVER BY HALF **PG 67**

Q&A WITH SAJAN PRAKASH **PG 70**

MUSIC

THREE CHEERS

SHANKAR-EHSAAN-LOY bring together three different styles into a tasteful fusion

EVEN AFTER 25 YEARS OF MAKING MUSIC TOGETHER, **SHANKAR-EHSAAN-LOY** ARE NOT DONE BELTING OUT HITS

HAVING THE DIRECTOR'S EAR
(from left) Loy Mendonsa, filmmaker Rakeysh Omprakash Mehra and Shankar Mahadevan

Shankar Mahadevan has been watching *The Family Man* and seems to be enjoying Manoj Bajpayee's new superstar celebrity. "Remember *Shool* (1999)?" Ehsaan Noorani asks, referring to one of their earliest hits—'UP Bihar Lootne', a song seemingly far from the Shankar-Ehsaan-Loy oeuvre, but one that became a rage in the late 1990s. Loy Mendonsa shares an anecdote he heard: "They had to stop the film in the theatre because people would be throwing money at the screen." Mahadevan adds how Bajpayee (the film's male lead) had rightly predicted the mania even before the release. The song is a fine exhibition of the trio's ability to immerse themselves and compose something authentic to the film's setting, even if it's outside their 'comfort zone'.

In a world where creative partnerships are usually fraught with egos, these three composers have been going strong for over 25 years. If this wasn't a good enough reason to sit down with one of Hindi cinema's game-changing composers (not a title to be thrown around lightly in the Rahman era), this year clocks 20 years of their breakout album, *Dil Chahta Hai*. Plus, they have a new soundtrack—Rakeysh Omprakash Mehra's *Toofaan*, releasing on July 16.

Coming together for Mukul Anand's *Dus* (1997), the trio has been credited with over 79 films in six languages, and one series, *Bandish Bandits*. Not only is theirs one of the most distinguished discographies of this era, it might even be one of the most versatile pieces of work in the history of Hindi cinema—a confluence of Mahadevan's bent towards Hindustani classical, Noorani's flair for rock, along with Mendonsa's gift around everything related to synth.

One simply has to look at the album of *Mirzya* (2016), also directed by Mehra. Featuring influences from EDM, jazz, blues to retro fused with Rajasthani folk, the album uses voices ranging from Sain Zahoor (Pakistan), Akhtar Chanal (Balochistan), the Nooran Sisters and Daler Mehndi (Punjab) to Kaushiki Chakraborty (West Bengal), along with mainstays like Mohan Kannan and Mame Khan. "'*Ek Nadi Thi*' just has voices and finger snaps as percussion. For a director to give us that respect is how he (Mehra) gets the best out of us. Just listen to the splashes of audio colours in the 'Mirzya' title track," says Mahadevan.

Having done some of the decade's best work in *Bhaag Milkha Bhaag* (2013) and *Mirzya*, *Toofaan* will be their fourth consecutive collaboration with Mehra. "He plants a seed in your head and walks away," says Mendonsa. Noorani adds: "He gives us space to breathe. He says, 'Let's compose, we won't reject anything.' And what comes out usually is something very pure." In *Toofaan*, Mehra's brief was not to ace the adrenaline of a 'boxing film', but the emotion where boxing is merely a backdrop.

With *Toofaan*, the trio is also back with one of their most regular collaborators, Farhan Akhtar. All it took for them to usher in a new era of Hindi film music were four bass notes in the title track of Akhtar's directorial debut *Dil Chahta Hai*. "Farhan thought that those notes had a nice question to them, so it was initially meant for the situation that became 'Jaane Kyun'. Then Shankar came out of the bathroom with a toothbrush in his mouth, singing 'Dil Chahta Hai' to those four bass notes," says Noorani. Mendonsa was trying a new bassline on his synth, which Mahadevan suggested they add to the finished melody of 'Tanhayee'. "It added a nice tension and anger to the song," says Mahadevan.

Like most mainstream composers, even Shankar-Ehsaan-Loy often find their work being dismissed because of the fate of a film. "I keep telling Ehsaan and Loy that we tend to lose respect for our own music because the films didn't do well," says Mahadevan. With the emergence of music streaming apps, Noorani feels a lot of their songs and albums have got a rebirth. "Someone tagged me, telling me how good the *Dil Jo Bhi Kahey* (2005) album is," says Noorani. Mendonsa has been intercepted during evening walks and told how *Dil Chahta Hai* brought listeners back to Hindi film music.

THE TRIO HAS PROVEN TO BE GAME-CHANGING FOR HINDI FILM MUSIC

Is there anything on the bucket list left to accomplish? "I think a Mani Ratnam film for sure," says Noorani. Mendonsa would like to score for a *Blade Runner*-like Indian sci-fi film.

Mahadevan is excited about the OTT projects set in the *desi* heartland like *Mirzapur* and *Family Man*. "These are such good shows, if they have great music *toh mazaa aa jaaye*," says Mahadevan. Just the variety of responses makes one wonder what Shankar-Ehsaan-Loy's oeuvre really is. After 25 years, it might be fair to pronounce that they can accomplish anything. ■

—Tatsam Mukherjee

MUSIC

THE RELUCTANT POPSTAR

Amit Trivedi has formed an independent record label to escape the gruelling demands of Bollywood

When work in pandemic-hit Bollywood dried up last year, Amit Trivedi, along with his team of musicians and lyricists, left Mumbai for his house in Pune. Here, he started to roll out non-film independent songs for his new record label AT Azaad. Trivedi produced over 20 songs, from which the garba number 'Moti Veerana' and the romantic 'Madhubala' became hits. The songs were accompanied by crisply-produced videos, many of which feature the notoriously shy Trivedi, lip-syncing and grooving with background dancers in tow. The transformation of Trivedi from a self-effacing genius to a stylish popstar was simply the byproduct of his need to go independent.

"I earlier thought I'd just need to make music," Trivedi says. "But now starting a music channel means doing videos, interviews, being presentable, speaking well. It's a different pressure altogether." He recently starred in the music video for the lounge-pop tune 'Churaya', his latest AT Azaad single. In the same week, there was a Bollywood release in Netflix's *Haseen Dilruba*. However, he is most proud of his two melodies for the Disney+Hotstar web series *Grahan*. The anti-Sikh riots-themed thriller offered Trivedi a chance to "jam just with the director and lyricist, as it used to be".

"Since the mid-2010s, Bollywood music has shifted. There is a demand for instant hits for the masses, triggered by deeper internet penetration in Tier II and III cities. Our music quality has taken a hit," Trivedi says. "That way, AT Azaad, or something unique like *Grahan*, offers a chance to create something interesting."

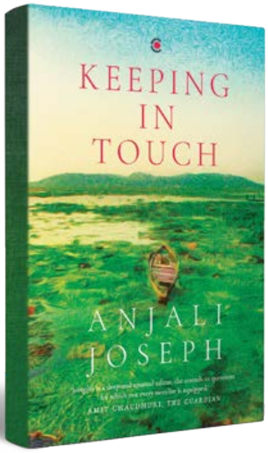
Indeed, most of the National Film Award-winning composer's best work came had happened in the first half of the 2010s: *Dev D* (2009), *Udaan* (2010), *Ishaqzaade* (2012), *Queen* (2014) and *Bombay Velvet* (2015), to name a few. Over time, background score-composing and South Indian films have become another way for Trivedi to highlight his skills. He has composed songs for the Telugu films *Sye Raa Narasimha Reddy* (2019) and *V* (2020), along with the Tamil, Telugu, Kannada, and Malayalam remakes of his Hindi hit *Queen*.

Trivedi's upcoming releases include *Rashmi Rocket*, *Rocket Gang* and *Qala*. He is also composing for a film in his mother tongue Gujarati, for the first time. "In our instant gratification culture, it's hard to grab people's attention with music that takes time to grow. But I am still trying to fit into this new digital environment and make good music," he says. "And I hope good music wins." ■

–Devarsi Ghosh

Over the past year, **Amit Trivedi** has gone from being a self-effacing genius to a stylish popstar

RITESH SHUKLA/GETTY IMAGES



KEEPING IN TOUCH
by Anjali Joseph
CONTEXT
₹599; 232 pages

BOOKS

MAYBE NOT

ANJALI JOSEPH'S NEW NOVEL WORKS BEST AS A LOVE STORY. IT IS UNDONE WHEN IT TRIES EXCEEDING THAT BRIEF

Within the first few pages of Anjali Joseph's new novel, the main protagonists have briskly bedded each other. The book's jacket describes itself as "uncompromisingly modern", perhaps telegraphing that they cannot be attached in any serious way. In *Keeping in Touch*, Joseph's fourth novel, a meet-cute in Heathrow airport will spawn a recurring long-distance relationship between Ved and Keteki, from London to Assam.

Ved, a UK-based venture capitalist, gives chase after their fleeting encounter in Mumbai. But commitment-phobic Keteki, cosy in her itinerant life and thronged by myriad lovers, keeps him at bay. Large parts of the novel unfold in Jorhat and Guwahati, where curator-designer Keteki lives and NRI bachelor Ved returns. His new assignment involves a project with a bulb factory in the region, making the pursuit all the more convenient. (There is a quasi-magic realist sub-plot involving the bulbs and an "intelligent filament" that responds to its environment, but doesn't amount to a whole lot.)

Keeping in Touch is readable, in a will-they-won't-they way. Ved and Keteki go through the motions of a mating dance while trying to untangle their own insecurities and emotional awkwardness. Other lovers, old and new, have walk-on parts. Keteki's uncle Joy Mama, whom Ved befriends, offers a guest room, history lessons and pithy advice from time to time.

The characters are recognisable 30-somethings, cosseted by wealth and social cachet, flitting between relationships and swiftly moving between India and the world, insiders and outsiders everywhere. But there is also something of the manic pixie dream girl about Keteki, her wistful free-spiritedness in service of Ved's new mission and sense of self. Assam seems to serve a similar purpose—as a staging arena for Ved's growing up. And if people are locked in a quest for self-actualisation, can a stint at a yoga ashram be far behind?

We are treated to a recurring tic in contemporary Indian English fiction—the intent to establish context, mandatory references to a "Hindu nationalist government", a Muslim man being lynched, a woman being harassed. There are several opportunities for Indiasplaining as London-bred Ved tries to blend in. We have explanatory passages on Assamese history and culture, mostly from the mouth of Keteki's convivial uncle. However, some of the dialogue feels trite, designed to reflect on big themes that otherwise seem not to intrude into the lives of these self-absorbed protagonists. Take this: "Assam. So beautiful, yet always being unmade", or "Any search for the original people of a place is a kind of story".

The novel is agreeable, if somewhat inauthentic, a love story bedevilled by its own attempts to be something more. ■

—Bhavya Dore

TOO CLEVER BY HALF

From start-up culture to feminism, Tahmima Anam's novel draws the right boxes. The only trouble is that it forgets to fill them in

Tahmima Anam
Fresh, funny, brave, savage, smart ... captures perfectly the age-old problems of men and women that no app can fix
KAMILA SHAMSIE
THE STARTUP WIFE

THE STARTUP WIFE
by Tahmima Anam
HAMISH HAMILTON
₹**599; 304** pages

TAHMIMA ANAM creates a fun parody of today's tech startup culture in The Startup Wife

Three New Yorkers who have always felt like outsiders—Asha, the immigrant; Jules, the poor little rich boy; and Cyrus, the unemployed hippie spirit guide—end up becoming the founders of a million-dollar start-up. Asha is the coder and Jules is the business head, but it's Cyrus with his enviable hair and smug memory for obscure religious rites who becomes the star and, later, the villain, of the start-up WAI (pronounced "why", short for We are Infinite), an app that "anticipates people's need for meaning and ritual". Yup.

Tahmima Anam creates a fun parody of today's tech startup culture in *The Startup Wife*, complete with exposed brick walls, an aversion for vowels (the characters eat at restaurants called "Pikl" and "Mylkist"), and "vegan superfoods" like "coffee hemp mylkshakes with extra CBD shots"—the clever hits just keep coming. How lovely then would it have been if the book had also made any kind of meaningful contribution to the conversation on consent, feminism, women in male-dominated professions and any of the other broad spectrum of complex issues it tries to cover. Unfortunately, it does little else apart from reaffirming what the reader likely already knows—that technology cannot save the world and that men will sometimes let you down.

Worse still, Anam applies the same broad strokes to her characters, who seem like cardboard cut-outs standing in for genuinely interesting and complex people. We never get to know Asha, this cool-headed nerdy programmer better, nor do we get to understand how the artistic, sensitive and utterly obnoxious Cyrus became who he is. Likewise, the extended cast of young founders, whose entire personalities can be summed up in single adjectives, lack nuance—the militant vegan, the female founder, the serious coder, the fatherly CFO.

What irks most of all is that Anam seems to present no clear point of view on any of the issues she tackles. Yes, women play as much of a role in diminishing themselves as men do; yes, all the organic superfoods in the world can't protect against climate change; yes, men have fragile egos; and, yes, the startup world is starting to seem very much like a cartoon of itself. These seem to be the only messages, scrawled in crayon with no shadow or depth. Opinion can come guised as parody and humour can make you think and feel; sadly, *The Startup Wife* does not even try to be more.

It is entertaining and I breezed through it over a lazy weekend. But once it was done, I forgot all about it. ■

—Tanushri Shukla

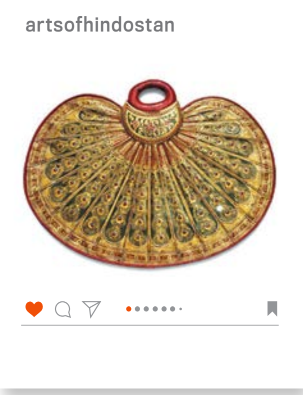
ONLINE ART

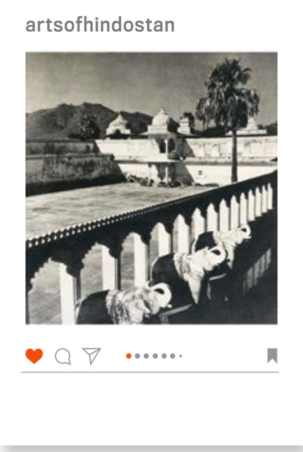
POSTS FROM THE PAST

Several Instagram accounts are now using art to make Indian history cool again

Mirza Ghalib was a mangophile; Artist Krishen Khanna's reaction to Mahatma Gandhi's assassination in 1948 took the form of an oil painting—a throng of mourning citizens engrossed in newspaper headlines of the day. The Instagram handle of Art-chives India (@artchivesindia) gives you a clear choice: you either look at this information as trove or trivia. Art-chives isn't alone. There are today several Instagram accounts that draw inspiration from the intersections of history, art and culture—Arts of Hindostan (@artsofhindostan), Indian Art Feed (@indianartfeed), Ancient Indian Art (@ancientindianart), among others. They are all interested in the subcontinent, in how we shape memory.

Art-chives India, which covers topics ranging from Mughal history, the religious significance of Banaras, Rajput architecture and even the etiquette of *paan*-eating, explains its ethos via an alliteration: "Magic, madness and magnificence of India." The account is an "evocation to our country's (hi)stories. The India of yesterday, the India of today and the India we want to be", says co-founder Vivek Wadhera.





artchivesindia

indianartfeed

SOCIAL MEDIA

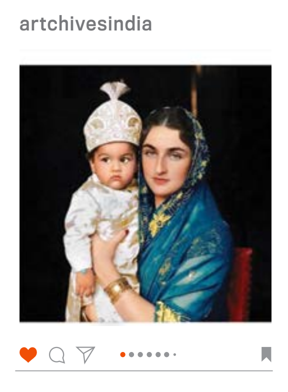
Someone's Always Listening

Apps like Clubhouse give you a voice—while threatening your privacy

Back in pre-liberalisation India, it wasn't unusual to pick up the telephone only to hear a conversation between two strangers. The shiniest new app on the internet, Clubhouse, is a digital and more deliberate version of the vintage wonder that was the cross connection. Only, instead of a random phone conversation, Clubhouse lets you listen in on strangers chatting on a subject of your choosing. It could be a chat featuring your favourite social media influencer or a Bollywood actor you love. It could be about anything from Left liberal bashing to K-dramas. Whatever subject interests you, Clubhouse probably has a "room" on it. All you have to do to enter is hand over a vast amount of personal data.

Launched last year, Clubhouse promises to be an antidote to lockdown boredom. The app now has more than 2 million active users in India. Between June 1 and June 14, 80 per cent of the app's global instals were from India. These are impressive numbers, particularly since Clubhouse is an invite-only app. This means that, to join, you must be invited by an existing user. Once you have joined, you can follow other Clubhouse users and listen to

> Between June 1 and June 14, 80 per cent of the Clubhouse app's global instals were from India



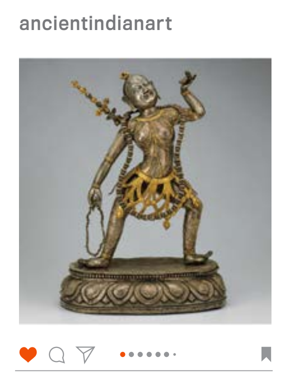


Image Courtesy INSTAGRAM

What started as a passion project in 2019 has today amassed over 41,000 followers. The Toronto-based Wadhera, who runs the page along with two co-founders, says, "Having received almost no education about the arts and crafts of India, students graduate from school uninformed citizens, detached from their rich cultural heritage." Through his page, he hopes to bridge the gap "by bringing stories that focus on often ignored aspects".

Apathy towards art among younger people was also the driving force for the Indian Art Feed, which calls itself a casual chronicler of "developments in modern and contemporary Indian art". Its founder, who wishes to remain unnamed, tells us he had once seen a crowd of art enthusiasts jostle to get a glimpse of a small Amrita Sher-Gil portrait at a major auction in New York. "After a few months, I attended the Sher-Gil retrospective at Delhi's National Gallery of Modern Art. Even on the weekend, there were just two people in attendance—a sad commentary on how little we have done in India to educate people about art. This episode made me think about ways to spread awareness about the history of Indian art."

Arts of Hindostan is another feed that has its love for India writ large over it. With a follower count of 52,000, it chronicles Indian art and antiquities, posting interesting trivia about vintage gems, Company art, and Mughal miniatures. So, is Instagram the right home for such cultural projects? "I think so," the Arts of Hindostan founder, who also insists on anonymity, says. "Just the other day a mother of an eight-year-old wrote to us, saying that her daughter has become addicted to Indian history. It was heartening to hear that." ■

–Shaikh Ayaz

YOU'VE GOT MAIL

The Newsletter renaissance

Revue

ScrollStack

substack

Once a promotional tool for businesses, the newsletter has been refashioned by writers to become a hybrid of the personal blog and the feature article. Hosted by platforms like **Substack, Revue** and **Scrollstack**, newsletters could be a set of curated links or an in-depth essay or a call to register for an event–the writer decides its nature and function. While many newsletters are free, most platforms offer the option of a paid subscription. As the space for features and analysis shrinks in mainstream media, the email newsletter may well be the last refuge of writers and critics.

Illustration by SIDDHANT JUMDE

live conversations in which people are usually talking over each other (or eavesdropping on someone).

Among the many security concerns–these include data spillage and the data scraped from 1.3 million users being posted on a popular hackers' forum–is that Clubhouse keeps a temporary encrypted buffer recording of conversations. There are also rumours that Indian government agencies have been granted permission to monitor conversations on Clubhouse. The Internet Freedom Foundation has filed a Right to Information application asking about this.

Clubhouse's success has led to other apps rolling out their own live-audio options, like Spotify's Greenroom and Twitter's Spaces. All these seek to capitalise on the growing popularity of podcasts, suggesting to listeners that interesting audio conversations and stories can be easily and cheaply produced in impromptu online gatherings. It's impossible to predict the impact of live audio on the podcast industry, but the situation feels eerily reminiscent of when free "content" from blogs started supplementing and replacing writing by professional critics and commentators. This practice sounded the death knell for writing as a paid profession. We can only hope listeners today are more discerning than readers and editors were in the past. ■

–Deepanjana Pal

ALAMY

SWIMMING AGAINST THE STREAM

No Indian swimmer before **Sajan Prakash** has been able to automatically qualify for the Olympics. The 200 metre butterfly specialist says it is perseverance that has helped him make the 'A' cut

Q. You have made history as the first Indian swimmer to gain direct qualification to the Olympics. How difficult was it?
We put in a lot of hard work to achieve the target of making the 'A' cut. Coming back from an injury and swimming with pain was the biggest challenge, but I never gave up. Working towards getting mentally strong helped me recover physically. It has all been worth it. I have had people call me and cry over the phone. I think it's the best gift for Indian swimming.

Q. You smashed the national record in Belgrade but missed the qualifying mark narrowly. What was your focus on in Rome?
We prepared keeping in mind the back-to-back meets. We were ready for the Belgrade meet and it went well. Over the next six days, we did some speed work and I felt great. It helped me gain confidence to achieve the target.

Q. The physical recovery from the injury you suffered in 2019 was one thing. How did you recover mentally to focus on the Olympic qualification?
My support team helped with the rehabilitation. But moving to Dubai and staying around positive people helped me become mentally strong and think positive.

Q. What are the changes that you have made over the past year?
Apart from swimming, I have worked a lot on the recovery part–more sleep, rehabilitation exercises, eating nutritious food, yoga, working on my breathing and keeping calm.

Q. How challenging is it to be a swimmer in a nation of non-swimmers?
Breaking the barriers in the early stages of my career was the biggest challenge. I could reach this level only with the help of my mother, my coach and friends. ■

–with Shail Desai

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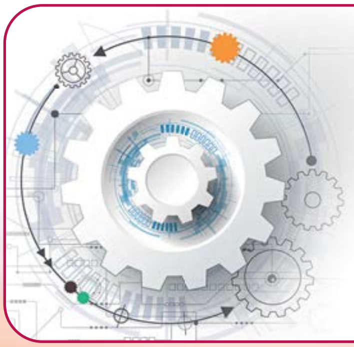

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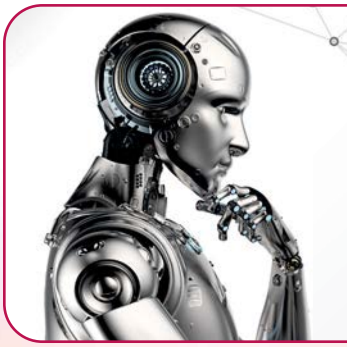

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